

*aliens, hippies, fbi agents, and cheap beer...*

**TALES FROM  
THE LAST RESORT**

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**BY THE MAD MICK**

## PART ONE

### CHAPTER ONE

**A**t first it seemed like just another star in the sky over Golden Gate Park on that balmy Indian summer night, but as it began its rapid descent, it more closely resembled a blazing meteorite which some radar system was guiding to a safe landing in a deserted meadow. As it began to cool, its luminescence quickly fading in the soft night air, a sense of urgency overcame its desire for peace.

“Do it now!” screamed Prime. “Focus your energy and replicate yourself into this world’s dominant life form before they find you as you are now.”

Secundus dutifully began the division process, splitting himself off from Prime so that two energy spheres existed where before there had been only one. Then, drawing needed energy from Prime, he reluctantly began to transform himself once again. “How many times have I done this?” he wondered aloud. “And why am I here?” He began to moan piteously.

Prime ignored his questions, saying only, “The dominant species here is called ‘Human’, Secundus, and an ugly type it is, too. So get on with it and take Human form.”

Secundus complied and soon, where once there had been only light, stood a fully-formed man, naked as Adam.

“Cute, very cute,” giggled Prime. “But you seem to have forgotten something.”

“I don’t understand.” Secundus was bewildered. “Have I done something wrong?” He looked down at his new body with some confusion.

“You’ll find out soon enough. You should have no trouble reading the minds of these ‘Humans’ since they seem to be rather simple affairs. But do it quickly to avoid violating any of their local customs. Any last questions before I leave you to your fate?”

Secundus thought for a moment. “Just why have I been sent here and forced to take this form? What is the purpose of all this?”



“As you should know by now, the replication process usually causes some memory loss, which is often only temporary. When you remember, you will act accordingly. But for now, you are a new being with no history, no role in their lives. You can use your powers as you choose. But now I must leave you.” As he spoke, the sphere of light that was Prime began to rise up into the sky, slowly at first, but quickly gaining speed so that in a matter of seconds it had already vanished from sight.

Secundus lowered his eyes. He was now a naked man, shivering in the dark. Not knowing what else to do, he turned and walked out of the park toward the lights of Fulton Street.

“...And stay out, you son of a bitch! Nobody rips me off and doesn't pay the price!”

The speaker was one BJ Duckworth, owner of The Last Resort, a rundown bar in a seedy location on the bay side of the lately fashionable South of Market area, dubbed SOMA by the hip. BJ had had his struggles with the bar since purchasing it upon his arrival in San Francisco in the spring of 1973 and now, more than seventeen years later, both he and his establishment were definitely beginning to show their age.

“Shit!” he complained. “I'm beginning to think there's no such thing as an honest bartender anymore. Now how the hell am I going to replace that bastard on such short notice? Considering what I can afford to pay and the reputation this place has got lately, I doubt that people are going to be lining up for the job.”

BJ was right. The bar had been going downhill lately, to the point that a popular joke with some of the regulars was that to work at The Last Resort was the last resort. It hadn't been like this when he had bought the place from its previous owner, a genial 300-lb. biker everybody called Black Jack. In those days it was known as a real melting pot, a place where hippies, Hell's Angels, and low riders could hang out together. Most of the problems then were centered on drugs and fights over women, and these were easily resolved by the appearance of Black Jack's sawed-off twelve-gauge from behind the bar.

However, with the coming of the 80's and the triple threat of Reagan, AIDS, and crack, BJ had seen the average age of his customers increase from 25 to 45, and the tone of the place change from youthful exuberance to middle-aged depression. He regretted this, being only 53 himself (and a young 53 at that). He had always subscribed to the theory that being with young people kept one young, and he found that dealing with old farts day after day, many of whom were younger than he was, was causing him to lose his normally optimistic view of life.

"Ah, well," he sighed, pouring himself another Irish and soda, "something will turn up. It always does. And if I have to work nights myself for awhile, what can it hurt? Maybe the evening customers'll prove to be a bit livelier. So buckle down, Duckworth, and wash those glasses. There's boozers to be served!"

"Damn it, Wanda, I just can't get it to start!"

"So just leave it alone, Rick, and let's hitch. I want to get downtown before the bar closes."

"Hitch? Man, I can't just let it sit here."

"Why the hell not? Who's gonna bother this broken-down piece of junk?"

"What are you calling a piece of junk? This is a 1967 Ford Econoline van. It got me to Woodstock and back and there's still a lot of miles left in this baby."

"Man, no wonder they call you Rick the Relic. Get your head outta the 60's! We're already in the 90's and that is a pile of junk. C'mon, let's go!"

"Holy shit, Wanda, look over there!"

"Jesus Christ, it's a naked dude, coming out of the bushes!"

The naked dude walked uncertainly toward them, holding up one hand in a friendly manner.

"Hey, man, what happened to you?" asked Rick. "You get mugged, or what?"

"Yes...mugged..." said the stranger haltingly.

"Even took your clothes, huh," said Wanda with a wink. "Not too bad, hey Rick?"

“Wanda! This is no time to be cruising!” Rick hissed. To the stranger he said, “Um, we’d give you a ride but our van broke down. We were just about to hitch downtown.” He looked at the stranger again and grinned in spite of himself. “You can’t go anywhere looking like that. I think I’ve got some old clothes in the back of my van that could fit you.” He walked to the rear of the van and rummaged around inside for a moment. When he returned, he was carrying a plaid shirt, a pair of greasy, torn jeans, and some old thin-soled running shoes. He handed them to the stranger. “Here, try these on. They ain’t too clean and they might be a little tight on you, but it sure beats running around here naked.”

As the stranger dressed he stared at both Rick and Wanda intently, as if he meant to memorize every detail of their existence.

Rick and Wanda wondered if they hadn’t just befriended a psycho.

“Ah,” said the stranger when he had finished dressing. He looked down at his body as if to judge the effectiveness of his makeshift apparel. “That is better,” he said approvingly. “Much better. You said your...van...broke down. What is wrong with it?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Rick. “And it really pisses me off. Bear just fixed it last month.”

“You can’t fix a piece of junk like that, Rick!” said Wanda with a wicked laugh. “Trust me on that one!”

“Shut up, Wanda...” Rick began, but then felt the stranger’s hand on his shoulder.

“One moment,” said the stranger. He appeared to have been lost in thought. “Could you humor me and try to start it again?”

“I don’t know what could have changed in five minutes, bro, but sure, whatever’s right.”

Rick walked slowly back to the van, got behind the wheel, and turned the key. Immediately the engine sprung to life, purring smoothly.

“Well, strip me and whip me!” said Rick reverently. “How the fuck did that happen?”

“Don’t ask questions!” cried Wanda, clapping her hands and quickly clambering into the passenger seat. “Put the pedal to the metal for The Last Resort!”

"Wait a minute, Wanda. Hey, man, you want a ride? We're going downtown, but we can drop you any place that's on the way."

"I don't know," said the stranger hesitantly. "One place is as good as another to me now."

Rick nodded his head sagely. "Ahh. You're sorta like 'on the road', huh?"

The stranger nodded his head in agreement. "That is true. I just arrived here so I'm not really sure where to go. What is this place you mentioned...Wanda? This 'Last Resort'?"

"Oh, it's just a broken-down bar," Wanda explained, "where all these old guys sit around drinking themselves to death and wishing it was twenty years ago. It's real depressing. We only go there when we're broke..."

"Which is most of the time," put in Rick.

" 'Cause Rick likes the guy who runs the place and he lets him run a tab," Wanda finished.

"Yeah, for sure," Rick agreed. "Come with us. You gotta meet this dude. For an old guy he's really hip, and smart too. He's got like all kinds of connections. I'll bet he could find you some place to sleep and maybe even a job, if you can get into that kind of stuff."

"All right," said the stranger. "I am not against an honest exchange of services for goods. I will accept a job."

"OK, then," said Rick. "Get in the back seat and I'll have us there before you know it. It's not midnight yet, so there's still plenty of time till last call."

"Put that *Graceland* tape on, Rick. You know, the one with that weird song about role models and cartoon graveyards. My favorite." Wanda got out of the front seat, went around to the back and seated herself close beside the stranger. "I'm riding in the back with what's-his-name here," she told Rick. "He may talk funny, but he sure looks good. Better than you, anyway."

Rick grunted in reply and then eased the van out onto Fulton Street and into the thin stream of downtown traffic. In no time at all they had passed Stanyan and were speeding down through the Western Addition toward Civic Center. The stranger turned around and watched the park recede through the rear window. He raised his hand in a gesture of farewell.

Wanda gave him a big smile and put her arm around his shoulder. "What's your name, anyway, mister? Or should I just call you The Incredible Hunk?"

By way of reply, the stranger leaned forward and said to Rick. "I look different from you, don't I?"

"You sure do," laughed Rick. "A lot less hair, but a lot more muscles. I'm surprised you could fit into those clothes." He shot a glance at Wanda. "I can sure see what Wanda's getting excited about. But then just about anything in pants gets Wanda excited."

"Watch your mouth, Rick!" snapped Wanda. "He's the first real man I've seen around here in ages. You are a real man, aren't you, honey? What is your name, anyway?"

The stranger gave her a serious look. "By a strange coincidence, Wanda, my name is the same as the title of your favorite song. You can call me Al." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "And now, may I rest until we get there? I find I'm rather tired."

"You poor baby," cooed Wanda. "Being mugged is no piece of cake. Just put your head on my shoulder, and I'll wake you up when we get there."

And that is what he did.

## CHAPTER TWO

**R**ick's van screeched to a halt in front of the entrance to The Last Resort. "Wake up, Al, we're here," said Wanda, gently shaking him by the shoulders.

"What...where..." Al sat up suddenly, nearly elbowing Wanda in the process. "I just had the strangest dream." He shook his head as if to clear it.

"Tell me all about it, honey," Wanda purred. "Maybe I can make you feel better." She began to vigorously massage Al's shoulders.

"Knock it off, you guys," said Rick. "Why don't you go inside and get us some brews. I've gotta find a place to park."

"Okay Rick, keep your shirt on!" She got out of the van, held the door open wide with one hand and beckoned toward Al with the other. "After you, handsome," she breathed.

Rather unsteadily, Al climbed out of the van and pushed his way through the old-fashioned swinging saloon doors which formed the entrance to the bar, Wanda following close behind. Once inside she took his hand and led him over to a long wooden bar crowded with nondescript middle-aged men morosely drinking their shots and beers. As she approached, a familiar voice greeted her warmly.

“Wanda, my dear, what an unexpected pleasure! Slumming at this hour of the night, and with such a handsome escort, too. My, my, whatever possessed you to honor my humble establishment tonight of all nights. Isn’t this the first of the month?”

“You know how it is, BJ,” Wanda lowered her voice. “Rick’s unemployment check never comes on time anymore. He’s out front parking the van. Be a good guy and give us three beers, Okay?”

“Certainly, dear lady, and will that be cash or charge?”

“Don’t try to be cute, BJ, it doesn’t suit you. Just put it on Rick’s tab. By the way, what are you doing behind the bar at this hour anyway? I thought your boy wonder, Fast Eddie, had the night shifts all locked up.”

BJ heaved a long sigh. “Between you and me, Wanda, Fast Eddie proved to be just a little bit too fast, if you know what I mean.”

“You mean—”

“I mean I caught him with his hand in the till surer than shit. And after all I did for that boy, trustin’ him with the keys to the place and payin’ him more than a decent wage. And him with no references to speak of. Why, I was like a father to him and look where it gets me.”

“I know, BJ, you just get no respect. But listen, I want you to meet someone I hope I’m gonna see a lot more of. BJ, this is Al—Al what, I don’t know yet. Al, this is Mr. BJ Duckworth, the only man I’d trust in a dark alley. Al—BJ. BJ—Al.”

As Al and BJ shook hands an interesting thing happened. It was not the sort of thing that anyone would casually notice, but BJ and Al clasped hands just a little longer, looked into each other’s eyes just a little more deeply than would be considered normal for a bartender and his customer. When they finally stopped looking at each other, BJ seemed at a loss for words.



At length he said, "...Well...Al...any friend of Wanda's..." He turned and busied himself behind the bar, remarking casually over his shoulder, "Your beer's on the house."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Duckworth," replied Al pleasantly, as BJ set three mugs of beer on the bar.

Wanda looked at BJ in astonishment. "Wow!" she exclaimed to Al. "I just don't believe this! BJ doesn't buy drinks for strangers. Not these days!"

BJ shot her a sharp look. "It's my business who I serve and what I charge, Wanda. And don't you be forgettin' it!" Before she could reply, BJ suddenly raised his hand and waved at a long-haired bearded man who was trying to make his way through the crowd toward the bar. "Rick! Rick the Relic, you old son of a bitch, I haven't seen you in weeks. Where the hell have you been?"

When Rick had finally been able to elbow his way up to the bar beside Wanda and Al, he said nonchalantly, "Oh, you know. Hanging out with the hip and famous. Spreading my karma around. You know how it is." He avoided BJ's intent gaze for a few seconds, "But seriously, BJ, I have a sort of a confession to make."

BJ folded his arms across his chest. "Go on, Rick."

"Well, you know that metal sculpture I made a couple of years ago, the one I could never sell?"

"Oh, yeah, I recall that one. Ugly looking monstrosity. The one you called 'Apocalypse Unchained'? Took up a whole room? What of it?"

"Well, I finally sold it last month. To a guy from Walnut Creek. He must've figured it was the latest thing 'cause he gave me five hundred dollars for it. So, for the last few weeks..."

"C'mon, Rick, you can tell me. You've been drinking in more 'fashionable' establishments, haven't you? Well, I am shocked! And saddened. After all we've been through together." He turned his back on Rick and began to carefully check the levels in the liquor bottles on the shelf behind the bar.

"But BJ, don't take it like that," Rick pleaded. "You know I always come back home, don't you?"

BJ grudgingly turned back around to face Rick. "Yeah, you always come home, all right. Like the Prodigal Son. But never when

you have any bread. Where have you been drinking lately? And what have they got that I haven't got?"

"OK, it's like this. You know those new beer bars in the Lower Haight? The ones that feature what they call microbrews on tap? Well, their stuff is really great, but it costs. Three bucks a pint and sometimes more. So now I'm back. And broke." He looked around the bar for a minute. "But really, BJ, this place gets more depressing every time I come in." He pointed to a few of the men at the bar who seemed to be guzzling their drinks and staring sadly off into space at the same time. "Just look at these middle-aged zombies. Why do you put up with them?"

BJ looked around and held out both hands in a gesture of helplessness. "They're the only customers I've got left, so what can I do? Not to change the subject, but your friend Wanda doesn't look particularly depressed. And who is that hunk she sauntered in with? I mean, look at him!"

Rick looked at him. Then he looked at Wanda. She and Al were standing at the bar talking and drinking and Rick thought to himself how good they looked together. Wanda, only in her early twenties, had the kind of figure that made strong men whimper and weak men cry. But even she seemed positively overshadowed by Al's good looks. He seems to be about 33 or 34, Rick mused, but something about him makes him look much younger. He took note of Al's full head of curly black hair and his piercing blue eyes, but he decided that the difference lay in his change of expressions: one minute he seemed grimly determined; the next laughing with boyish charm, depending on his mood. His firm jawline almost concealed a slender aristocratic neck. And even in his ill-fitting borrowed clothes he had a body that would turn heads on Castro Street...

Rick's musings were cut short by Wanda's impatient tap on his shoulder. "C'mon, Rick, there's a booth just opened up in back. Let's go take a load off, huh?"

"Sure, Wanda, just a minute. Look, BJ, Al is just a guy we met tonight out by Golden Gate Park. He said he got mugged. Didn't have a stitch on him when we picked him up. In fact, those are my old clothes he's wearing."

"Hmm," said BJ. "Looks better in them than you ever did." He grinned at Al. "So, stranger, just passing through? You a tourist, come to see the sights of our City by the Bay? Or what?"

"He told me he's 'on the road'," said Rick, a tinge of awe in his voice.

"Just a moment, Rick," Al interrupted. "I can speak for myself. It is true that I come from a place far distant from here. And when I told you that one place is as good as another to me now, I meant it. But now I think this may be the place. Mr. Duckworth, Rick mentioned to me that you had...connections. That maybe you could find me a place to stay. Or even a job. I wouldn't ask you, having just met you, but you seem to be the kind of person one can trust. And judging by the tone of your establishment here, you also seem as if you could use some help from someone you can trust. Unlike this 'Fast Eddie' person."

"I don't know," said BJ uncertainly. "Where are you from? How long do you plan on staying? I always worry about you drifters. Aside from everything else, if you've got a record, I could be in big trouble."

Al suddenly blanched, but quickly recovered. "Not to worry, Mr. Duckworth. I have absolutely no record, anywhere." He hurriedly drained the last of his beer.

Rick spoke up quickly. "I'll vouch for him, BJ. Besides, you know that you and the cops have had an agreement for years. They don't hassle you, and nobody here calls the cops."

"This is true," replied BJ a bit smugly. "It's always been the law of the jungle down here." He turned back to Al and scratched the stubble on his chin. "Well," he said slowly. "I suppose I could give you a job. It seems I suddenly need a bartender. I wouldn't be able to pay you much, and the hours are long. But on the bright side, I also have a room in the back where you could sleep, which means you could make a little more by doubling as a sort of security guard. So what do you say?"

"Mr. Duckworth, I would accept your kind offer, but I know nothing about bartending."

BJ waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, never mind about that. The boys here mostly just drink shots and beers. About the fanciest drink you'll ever have to make is a scotch and soda. I'll show you the

ropes and, believe me, you'll be a pro in no time. After all, I'm an excellent teacher. Now, go have fun with your friends there and at two o'clock we'll close up and clean up and I'll show you your room. Tomorrow we'll start your training at about four in the afternoon and then we'll discuss your salary requirements. And Al..."

"Yes, Mr. Duckworth?"

"Don't worry about a thing. I think you're going to work out just fine."

## CHAPTER THREE

**A**s Al and Wanda made their way back to the empty booth, Rick hesitated for a moment and then said tentatively, "Oh, BJ..."

"I know, I know," said BJ with a sigh. "Three more beers and put them on your tab. Do you realize that if you ever paid your tab in full I could retire in style?"

"I try, BJ, I really do. But when it comes to money..."

"Never mind, Rick, never mind. There's more to life than penny-pinching and real friends are hard to come by." He drew the three beers and set them on the bar in front of Rick. "And that reminds me." He leaned across the bar and whispered in Rick's ear, "What do you really know about Al? You said you'd vouch for him but you and I both know you'd vouch for anybody in a jam." He straightened up again, still speaking in a low voice. "Don't get me wrong, Al seems like a great person and all, but there's something about him that bothers me. I can't put my finger on it. And yet when he's talking to me it's like we've known each other for years. It's unsettling. Know what I mean?"

Rick nodded. "Now that you mention it, there does seem to be something strange about him. When we found him wandering around at the edge of the park, naked and all, I just naturally assumed he'd been mugged. So I asked him and he agreed. But you should have seen him, BJ, not a mark on that beautiful bod of his or a hair out of place. And this guy's got muscles out the ass.

How could somebody force him to hand over everything, including his clothes and him not make a move? I mean, I wonder, you know?"

"Hmm," intoned BJ reflectively. "That is a mystery. Still, for some reason I trust him instinctively. And I believe you do, as well. And that, at least for the present, is good enough for me."

"Rick!" yelled Wanda from the back booth. "Where's the beer? Al's getting thirsty!"

"Al this, Al that," Rick complained. "It's been that way ever since we met the guy. It looks like Wanda's really falling for this mysterious hunk. Coming, Wanda!" he yelled back. "Who was your slave last week?"

Rick took the beers back to the booth and sat down across from Al. Wanda was draped dreamily over Al's shoulder humming contentedly along with Sinatra's "Witchcraft" which was playing on the jukebox.

"Wanda, go hustle a buck and play some good tunes on the box. I want to talk to Al for a minute."

"Oh, guy stuff huh?" said Wanda with a giggle. "Okay, but don't take too long. Me and Al were just starting to get acquainted, weren't we, honey?"

Al agreed somewhat nervously. "Strangers should always get acquainted. Then they wouldn't be strangers."

As Wanda got up and strolled across the room toward the jukebox, Rick took his cue. "Right on, man. Words to live by. So what say you and me get acquainted, Al. Like, what's your story, anyway? I mean, I'm no mental giant, but some things about you just don't make sense, bro. Like you coming out of the bushes totally naked and saying you'd been mugged, but there wasn't a scratch on you. I know 'cause I looked. And another thing, my van starting up like that, when I swear that not five minutes before we met you it was deader'n Jimi Hendrix. And you getting a free beer and a job from BJ not five minutes after you met him, when he's got beggars and scam artists comin' in here all the time. So just who are you, man, and where do you come from?"

At that moment Rick was interrupted by a loud commotion on the other side of the room. They both looked up just in time to see a beer glass shatter against the wall by the jukebox.



“Don’t you ever try that again, you asshole!” they could hear Wanda screaming. “You’ve hit on me once too often! Like they say on TV, no means no, you creep!”

“Aw, c’mon baby, be good to me!” pleaded a large leather-clad biker whose bearded face and large beer gut were pressed hopefully against Wanda’s prominent breasts. “I can do more for you than those two fags you’re sitting with. You oughta try making it with a real man for a change.”

“Get the fuck off me, you big moron!” Wanda tried to push him away, but his sheer bulk was too much for her.

Suddenly Al was standing by her side. “I think the lady wants you to go away,” he said evenly.

“Fuck off, faggot!” snarled the biker, putting his arms around Wanda and roughly pulling her even closer.

Al looked him in the eye. The biker, with an expression of surprise, looked Al in the eye and slowly let his arms fall to his sides, at the same time backing away a few steps. Wanda looked at them both in disbelief and gratefully hurried back to their booth.

“What’s your name, friend?” Al asked conversationally.

“George. They call me Crazy George,” said the biker obediently.

“Well, Crazy George, I don’t think you want to ruin such a nice evening by offending the lady, do you?”

“No, no, of course not. I...I’m sorry if I offended you or the lady.” George was shuffling his feet as if he really wanted to be somewhere else.

“My name is Al. And the next time I see you maybe we’ll have a nice chat. Get acquainted.” He looked at George meaningfully. “But don’t you have to be somewhere about now?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right!” exclaimed George with relief. “I really got to run now. Nice meeting you, Al!” Then he turned and ran out of the bar without saying another word.

“Nice meeting you, George,” said Al thoughtfully as he went back to the booth to rejoin Rick and Wanda.

“Wow, that was so neat!” Wanda was saying to Rick as Al slid in beside her. “I’ve never seen anybody make Crazy George back down like that. He is one mean motherfucker.” She turned to Al and

put her arms around his neck. "My hero! How the hell did you do that?"

He gently removed her arms and said distractedly, "George just remembered a previous engagement."

"You're lucky he didn't hurt you," Rick said in a worried voice.

"Oh, he wouldn't really *hurt* me. But some things are even worse," she said with a shiver.

Just then BJ appeared at their booth. "Al, it's about time to close up," he said. "We start by giving last call and kicking out the rowdies, although it seems you've started already. What did you do to that guy?"

"Oh, nothing really. I just reminded him of what he was doing and he thought better of it, that's all."

"Well, if you can, uh, reason with Crazy George like that, I'm going to have no problem leaving you alone here at night. I've had trouble with him before."

"Don't worry, Mr. Duckworth," said Al with a smile. "Your bar is safe with me."

Without further ado, BJ led Al back to the bar, then rummaged through a large box under the beer taps for a few moments. In a few seconds he brought out a brass gong about two feet in diameter.

"Gets their attention," he chuckled. He handed Al a large felt-tipped mallet. "Will you do the honors?"

Al gingerly accepted the mallet from BJ and turned it over in his hand a few times. Then he raised it over his head and firmly struck the gong a single blow. As the reverberations slowly died away, most of the men at the bar were hurriedly downing their drinks and looking expectantly in BJ's direction.

"Gentlemen!" intoned BJ loudly. "And lady!" He gestured to Wanda who stood up and made a mock curtsy. "Most of you know what the traditional Ringing of the Gong means. Those who don't, ask your neighbor. But tonight I want to introduce to you a new bartender," he clapped Al on the shoulder, "who is about to be inducted into the sacred mystery of the Last Call Ritual. His name is Al. Treat him well and he may occasionally treat you." He turned his head toward Al and addressed him in a softer voice. "Al, it's time for

the Cry of the Wounded Innkeeper.” Before Al could say anything, BJ hurriedly whispered something in his ear.

“What?” inquired Al.

“Just do it,” insisted BJ.

Al shrugged his shoulders and climbed up onto the bar. He looked into the faces of the customers now assembled about three deep around him. They were now all looking expectantly at him. He looked back at BJ, grinned for the first time and said in a loud deep voice, “You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here! Drink up, people!”

Al jumped down from the bar and watched with approval as the remaining patrons of The Last Resort quickly guzzled the contents of their glasses and staggered out the door into the still-warm night air.

BJ looked at Al warmly. “Al,” he said, “I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

**W**hen the last of the customers had been persuaded to leave, and BJ and Al had thoroughly swept, mopped and fumigated the bar with the assistance of Rick and Wanda, BJ slumped heavily on a barstool.

“Thanks for the help, friends,” he said with a tired smile. “These people get worse every day! I mean cigarette butts stuffed in the jukebox. Drinks spilled on the pool table. Not to mention the usual breakage. Sometimes I wonder why I bother.”

“Oh, c’mon, BJ.” Rick clapped him on the back. “What else would you do?”

“You’re right, as usual,” BJ sighed. “But at times like these I think about just chucking it in and backpacking across Europe like I always meant to do. While I’m still young enough, I mean.”

“Anyway, BJ,” spoke up Wanda, “now that you’ve got Al here to help you out I just know things are gonna be better.”

“I’m just not used to working nights anymore, I guess,” BJ mused. “During the three years Fast Eddie was here I got sort of

spoiled. I should have caught on earlier. The place was always full, but I was struggling just to break even."

"I could always send Bear and Crazy George after him," offered Rick. "They always like a good excuse to kick some ass."

"No, don't bother," he replied. "Though I must admit I'm tempted. Like you always say, Rick, 'what goes around, comes around.' No, there's no use us getting our hands dirty with the likes of Fast Eddie."

While the others were talking, Al was pacing around the bar, picking up a bottle here, an ashtray there, and looking at each item as if it were a piece of some elaborate jigsaw puzzle.

"Anyway, what's done is done," BJ concluded, "and I find I'm nearly done in. Al, why don't you see your friends out and then come back and I'll show you your room."

Rick and Wanda said their goodbyes to BJ, and then they and Al quietly left the bar. As they walked outside into the street, a new moon was just beginning to rise over the Bay Bridge. The air was still warm and calm, a prelude to another hot Indian summer dawn. As they stopped to admire the moon, the silence was complete. Wanda shivered suddenly.

"Al," she said softly, "I feel like I'm just getting to know you, and there's so much I want to talk to you about. Can I come and see you tomorrow night?"

"Of course you can, Wanda, any time. But why don't you bring Rick with you. He never received the answers to his questions, did you, Rick?"

"No," admitted Rick. "But after the way you rescued Wanda, and seeing what BJ thinks of you already...well, you seem like an all-right dude to me." He paused for a moment and then continued somewhat bashfully. "Um, Al, you don't by any chance, uh, swing both ways, do you?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Uh, you know, that's when you like both guys and chicks. I can tell from the way Wanda acts that you go for chicks. She's never wrong about that stuff. But I kinda wish you went for guys, too."

"To tell the truth, I'm not sure," admitted Al. "Where I come from one is not encouraged to think about these things, believe me, much

less do anything about them. So this is all new to me. I must have time to sort things out."

"Oh," said Rick. "I get it! You must be, like, from the Midwest or someplace where everybody's still in the closet!"

"Yes," replied Al with relief. "That's it, exactly. But if it turns out I like 'guys', you'll be the first to know."

Rick laughed out loud. "Al, you are one crazy dude! But it's getting late, so me and Wanda have to split. Oh, just one more thing, Al?"

"Yes?"

"Um, uh, do you think my van will start? I had to park it about six blocks away."

"Yes, of course, Rick. Your van will be okay. It's like you say, 'whatever goes around comes around,' right?"

"Right on, Al!" replied Rick enthusiastically.

Wanda stood up on tiptoes and kissed Al lightly on the cheek. "So long Al, baby. See you tomorrow night."

As Rick and Wanda turned and walked away, Al raised his hand and waved at them tentatively. "To friendship," he said softly. Then he went back to The Last Resort. As he entered the swinging saloon doors, he noticed BJ with his face down on the bar, snoring, a half-empty whiskey glass in his outstretched hand.

"Wake up, Mr. Duckworth," said Al, gently shaking him by the shoulders. "Time for us to get some sleep."

"Huh, wozzat?" snorted BJ, suddenly jerking his head up and spilling his drink in the process. He blinked once or twice and then said more lucidly, "Oh, Al, I must have dozed off for a moment. Let me show you where your room is." He rather unsteadily poured himself another drink from the Jameson's bottle on the bar.

Then he started to stand up, but Al put a hand on his shoulder. "I wonder," Al said, gazing deeply into BJ's eyes, "if we couldn't have a nightcap first. I've not had a chance to get acquainted with you yet."

"Why sure, Al, sure, if that's what you want," he replied, now unaccountably fully awake. "I like a man who likes to talk. No better qualification for a good bartender than a touch of the blarney. Why I remember when I first arrived in Seattle in '68. Just a young feller I



was too, must have been about your age. Well, I got a job tending bar at a basement saloon near the Greyhound station, and a terrible filthy hole in the ground it was too. What really impressed me then was that we got a lot of soldiers stopping in there traveling to Fort Lewis, the Army's basic training camp for the region, on their way to Vietnam. That was at the height of the war, remember, and I can still recall those hundreds of young despairing faces, some of 'em no older than eighteen. They were clearly not there to party, but I was able to talk to some of them, cheer 'em up a bit by getting them interested for the time being in something outside their poor miserable lives and I could see they thanked me for it, though they didn't have much to say..." He broke off suddenly and looked at Al, who was still looking at him intently and had not changed expression through his whole speech. "But I seem to be monopolizing the conversation," he finished a bit sheepishly. "Why don't you tell me a little about yourself, Al?"

"Another time, Mr. Duckworth, if you don't mind," replied Al. "It's late. Drink up, and show me where I'm to sleep. But first, I have a question for you."

"Ask me anything."

"All right. Why is it that Rick and Wanda both seem to be attracted to me? I was under the impression that they lived together."

"Why bless you, my boy, so they do, so they do," chuckled BJ, draining his glass once more and then refilling it from the rapidly diminishing contents of the Jameson's bottle. "They live together, all right, but not in the way you think. They're just roommates at an artistic commune over on Page and Fillmore in the Lower Haight called The Madhouse. It's run by a guy name of Marty Mathews, and they live there with a bunch of 'arty' types and their various boy- and girlfriends. Sexually speaking, it's the type of place where 'anything goes', if you know what I mean. The only thing Rick and Wanda definitely have in common is that they both like men. Rick found Wanda living in a crack house about three years ago. He took an interest in her, said she reminded him of his kid sister or something. He got her cleaned up and off the drugs and then talked her into living with him so she'd have somebody around to keep her from yielding to temptation, at least in the beginning. But they must have

gotten used to each other, 'cause they're still together, though Lord knows why, the way they bicker and fight with each other constantly, just like an old married couple. You know, you've heard 'em."

Al listened to BJ's recitation thoughtfully. "But what am I to do, then," he asked, "about their feelings for me? They're both my friends. I don't want to cause any problems between them."

"Not to worry, Al." BJ put his arm around Al's shoulder. "They're not possessive with each other, if that's what you mean. Sure, Rick feels protective toward Wanda, but he's never been bothered by any of her flings. I guess he feels that's her business. Likewise, Wanda's never had her feelings hurt by any of the hunky Castro guys makin' eyes at Rick and ignoring her. Don't be surprised," he nudged Al in the ribs with his elbow, "if one or both of them doesn't suggest a three-way before the week is out. After all, this is San Francisco, the sexual Disneyland of the West. But don't feel pressured. You can be honest with them without worrying about bruised egos."

"Thank you," said Al with a sigh of relief. "That's been preying on my mind for hours. Now I think I can sleep. Would you be so good as to...?"

"Of course, of course." BJ rose hurriedly. "Where are my manners? It must be going on for four. Come this way." He led Al toward the back of the bar, past the pool table and the jukebox, to a small curtained-off area in the corner. He parted the curtain to reveal a sort of improvised storeroom. Liquor boxes were stacked everywhere, including on top of the skeleton of an old rusted-out cast iron stove. BJ moved some boxes around to create a path through the disarray. "This used to be the kitchen," he confided to Al, "back in the 60's when they actually served food here. And right through that door over there is a little room where the cook used to sleep when he had to get up early to start the soup or whatever." He went over and opened the door for Al, saying "Don't worry, it locks from the inside so you can have your privacy. See," he swept his hand over the room. "A comfy little cot, some old beer barrels for chairs, even a little wash basin. All the comforts of home! And out here, this other door opens onto the alley in back." BJ unlocked the padlock and tried to push the door open. "Oof! Seems to be stuck. Give me a hand, Al."

BJ and Al were pushing for all they were worth when suddenly, a shriek split the early morning calm and the door burst open, flinging them out into the alley.

"What do you mean disturbin' an old lady's slumber at this time o' night?" came a shrill voice from a heap of clothes lying on the sidewalk. Slowly a figure emerged from the heap which they finally recognized as that of an old woman.

"A thousand pardons, dear lady," apologized BJ. "I had no idea it was you. Why on earth were you camped out against the door?"

"Dogshit on my mattress again. Can't abide dogshit," said the old lady firmly.

"Al," said BJ, taking the old woman's hand. "Allow me to introduce you to this fascinating creature. This is Queen Mab (at least that's what I call her, she won't tell me her real name). Mab, my dear, this is Al. He's going to be our new bartender."

"What happened to the last one?" she snapped.

"He, er, didn't work out," admitted BJ.

"I told you." Her self-satisfaction was evident. "His palm said he wasn't to be trusted."

"Queen Mab tells fortunes, Al," returned BJ, eager to change the focus of this bizarre conversation.

"Let me see your hand, Al," said Queen Mab imperiously.

Al obediently held out his hand and the old lady grasped it in hers. After a prolonged period of muttering and mumbling she looked up into Al's face and gasped, "Oh, my lord. I had no idea it was you. Please forgive me." She let go of his hand and sank to her knees.

"Arise, Queen Mab," said Al, as if he were playing the King of England in a historical pageant. He took her hand, kissed it chivalrously, and pulled her slowly to her feet.

Silently she regarded Al with a look of wonder. Then she wandered blissfully down the alley.

BJ looked at Al suspiciously. "What was all that about?" he demanded.

"I was just humoring a crazy old lady," replied Al. "No harm in that. Possibly she confused me with someone else. Her son, perhaps."

“Perhaps,” BJ agreed grudgingly. “But Queen Mab is supposed to be psychic. Even if she is a little crazy, there must be some other reason she reacted to you like that.”

“I doubt it,” said Al with a yawn. He waved his hand dismissively. “Leave me now. I must sleep.”

“Whatever you say, Al,” said BJ with a shrug. “See you tomorrow.”

As Rick and Wanda got out of the van—miraculously, they’d found a parking space right in front of the Madhouse—they were surprised to see a Yellow Cab come screeching around the corner and make an abrupt stop directly across the street from them. An attractive young woman in her mid-20’s slid briskly out of the back seat, slammed the door shut and, proffering a handful of bills to the driver, told him grandly to “Keep the change, my good man.”

The cab sped away. She straightened the rabbit fur stole around her shoulders and took off her stiletto heels, inspecting the broken stump of one of them with some dismay. Her person was in disarray—makeup smudged, gaping holes in her black fishnets, buttons missing on her low-cut ruffled blouse, her skirt awry—but as she padded across the street in her stocking feet she waved her broken shoe in the direction of Rick and Wanda and called out cheerfully, “Hey, you two, I’m home!”

“Simona,” said Rick, “almost didn’t recognize you in your work clothes. So how’d the bachelor party go?”

“Don’t ask, don’t ask! Those frat boys—feh! Never again, like I always say. They paid me handsomely, but I barely escaped with my life! You’d think those guys had never seen an exotic dancer before. Ah, well, it’s a living, I suppose,” she finished with a grin. “So what’s up with you guys? Must be almost dawn. Just getting home?”

“Simona, I can’t wait to tell you what happened to us tonight,” said Wanda with excitement. “We found this really hunky guy...”

Fifteen minutes later she was still talking. “And I swear, when Al told Crazy George to get lost and he actually left, well, I thought I’d die! Boy, talk about chivalry in action.”

“But there’s something weird about Al,” put in Rick. “I’d bet my stash he’s not just an ordinary dude. I can pick up on his vibes. I

didn't hang out with the Maharishi in the 70's for nothing, you know. This guy's like on another spiritual plane or something."

"Golly!" giggled Simona. "Sounds like he's got you guys in his power already! I've gotta meet this guru of yours."

"You could come down to the bar with me tomorrow night and scope him out," suggested Wanda. "Tell me what you think. But remember, hands off! I saw him first."

"You know me, kids," said Simona. "Like that old radio show says, I love a mystery! I'll get the goods on this guy, just you wait!"

## CHAPTER FIVE

Finally all is quiet. Morning has broken and now the sun is just starting to rise over the Bay, painting touches of color on the ancient rooftops and modern towers of downtown San Francisco. It paints these colors self-consciously, as if it knows how many thousands of picture postcards it has to compete with. But as the sun climbs higher, its rays grow stronger and harsher and begin to illuminate the littered streets and filthy alleys South of Market where few choose to live. The sun is indifferent to the effects of color now for there are no competing picture postcards of this scene.

Al is sitting on his cot, looking out of the dirt-encrusted window of his tiny room at the back of The Last Resort, watching his first Earth sunrise. The hardest part, he feels, is over. Now all he has to do is to live here among the poor and the wretched, attract no attention, and bide his time. He has learned much, spoken and unspoken, from his new friends, and he feels ready to begin his role as a common working man. The thought gives him pleasure, a warm feeling inside, though he knows not why. Like an actor who finds a temporary respite from the cares of his real life through his life upon the stage, Al has all but forgotten his previous existence. How could he not? There is no frame of reference.

Suddenly his reverie is broken by a soft tapping at the alley door. Al shakes his head to try to clear away the effects of alcohol and lack of sleep and calls out softly, "Who's there? What do you want?"



"It's me, Al. 'Queen Mab'. The 'crazy old lady'. Let me in. I have to talk to you for a moment. Are you alone?"

"Yes, I'm quite alone. As far as I know, there's no one else in the building. Just a moment and I'll unlock the door."

He does so and Queen Mab enters regally, wearing her rags like perfumed silks. "Promise me you'll hear me out before you say anything," she begins, putting a grimy finger to his lips.

"I will be quiet and listen to you for as long as you wish," says Al, sitting down on the cot.

"First of all, I'm not mad. Maybe a little eccentric, but certainly not mad. And I'm not stupid, either. But I am, or think I may be at least, somewhat psychic. Look at me and tell me how old you think I am," she demands suddenly.

"If you're psychic," he says, "you know I'd have no way of telling."

"True enough! I knew I was right about you!" She claps her hands almost girlishly and sits down on the cot beside him. "You might be surprised to know that I'm only forty-nine years old. Forty-nine! Why your friend Duckworth is older than I am and yet he's a dashing figure of a man and I'm a decrepit old woman and do you know why?" She shakes her finger at him menacingly and then thumps her chest. "Because I've been on the streets for the last ten years, that's why! Ten years on the streets does things to a woman, you know." She glares at him as if daring him to refute this statement, but he remains silent. "Anyway, that's neither here nor there." She collects herself and continues in a lower voice, almost confidingly. "I am—or was—a college-educated woman, one of those fancy schools back East, which one doesn't matter. I had a good job, a nice apartment, even boyfriends, though I can't remember why at the moment. Then little things started happening. Sometimes when I touched someone or he touched me, it seemed I could see right into his heart. I became aware of his most private dreams, hopes, fears. It began to happen more and more often until I couldn't stop the images, visions, whatever they were. And the worst part about it is, I knew that what I was seeing was real and true. These visions crowded into my mind during the day and became my constant companions at night. Needless to say, I soon

began to show the effects of this unfair burden and I lost my job, my friends, almost my mind. Now I live on the street and make a few dollars telling fortunes. Most of the time I act crazy in order to conceal my contempt for all the supposedly 'good' people out there who don't give a damn about people like me." She stands up and looks out the window. "Duckworth amuses himself by calling me Queen Mab and treating me like a tourist attraction, but I've never told anyone here my real name, except for the other street people who I know and respect, but I'm going to tell you. It's Marjorie."

The entire time she has been speaking, Al has been sitting quietly on the cot, listening intently. Now he stands up and joins her at the window. "I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Marjorie," he says softly.

She gives him a look containing both ecstasy and terror and then continues. "So tonight, or this morning rather, you literally stumble into my life. Listen, Al, I know who you are. You're the Savior, come back again after all these blood- and tear-stained centuries. I knew the minute I touched your hand. You're not human, Al, but you're good. And kind. So who else could you be?"

Al gives her a serious look and puts his finger to her lips. "Shh!" he says in a low voice. "Listen to me, Marjorie. At the moment I'm not completely sure who or what I am. There are gaps in my memory. But I know I'm not who you think I am."

She touches his cheek with her hand as if to reassure him. "Don't worry, Al. I know you can't reveal yourself. But you have powers and abilities far beyond us. You must have! I can feel it! Help us, Al! This world, this earth, we're all drowning in our own filth and excesses and we still call it progress. Do something to help us before it's too late!"

They sit back down on the tiny cot. Marjorie starts sobbing into her hands. As the sun begins to stream weakly through the dirty window, Al puts his arm around her thin shoulders and says to her gently, "No, I'm not who you think I am. I can't interfere with the destiny of these people and this world. But if there's anything I can do for you, or for anyone else, I will do it. And that's a promise."

She gets up, dries her eyes and looks Al full in the face. "Okay Al, we'll leave it at that for now. But if you remember, then you will

know what to do. Until then, help the people in need. Not me, I'm too old and set in my ways." She flashes him a smile. "Besides, it's rather fun sometimes being mad. No one holds you responsible for your actions, and you can get away with a lot of shit nobody else can. I'm going back to my alley now, my domain. Time to make my rounds."

She goes out the door. Al sits there watching the world from his window.

## CHAPTER SIX

**E**arly that afternoon Al was disturbed by an insistent knocking on the door of his room.

"Wake up, Al!" hollered BJ. "I damn near forgot!"

"Forgot what?" muttered Al sleepily, for after the events of the previous night and morning, he had only just gotten to sleep.

"Clothes, man!" replied BJ. "We've got to get you some clothes. Can't have you working at a classy joint like The Last Resort looking like a street person. What will the customers think? Fortunately there's a little uniform shop just up the street where we can get you fixed up for practically nothing. Guy that owns the place owes me a favor."

"Oh, all right!" Al reluctantly dressed in his old clothes and allowed BJ to lead him where he would.

So it was that when Al and BJ returned to the bar at about three that afternoon, Al was attired properly yet resplendently in a white dress shirt, tight black pants, polished black leather shoes, and a little red bow tie (which BJ had insisted upon).

"Now then," began BJ, when he had made sure that Al was dressed to his satisfaction. "We open the bar at four in the afternoon and close at two in the morning. Can't stay open later than that, it's the law. All you have to do is serve the drinks, wash the glasses, bus the tables and booths, keep the bar polished, empty the ashtrays, and in your spare time make sparkling, witty conversation with the customers (though God knows the people we've been getting lately wouldn't know wit from shit)." He took a deep breath and proceeded

before Al could say a word. "I'll stay with you for a couple of hours to make sure you've got the hang of things. I've also got to teach you how to hook up a keg and get it to drawin' good." He looked Al up and down. "With your build you should have no trouble wrestlin' the kegs out from the back and hookin' 'em up. Other than that, just keep the bar stocked with liquor and bottled beer. And no smokin' or drinkin' on duty (at least till I know you better)." He ducked down under the bar and came up with a large hardbound book. "And, oh yes, just in case some bozo brings in a fancy broad who wants one o' those trendy mixed drinks, here's the bartender's friend, The Complete Guide to Making Popular Mixed Drinks." He handed it to Al. "I'll come back at eight or nine and give you an hour's dinner break, and then it's all yours until one forty-five when you give last call."

He paused again for breath, then nudged Al slyly in the ribs. "You do remember the Cry of the Wounded Innkeeper, don't you Al?"

"You Don't Have to Go Home, But You Can't Stay Here," intoned Al with a straight face.

"Fantastic!" enthused BJ. "Then just kick out the rowdies at two o'clock sharp or the ABC—that's the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board to you—will have my ass. Any questions?"

"I don't think so," replied Al thoughtfully. "It all seems quite logical—serve the drinks, serve the customers, and you will serve the bar."

"That's what I like to hear, Al!" exclaimed BJ, jovially clapping him on the back. "Now let's go crank up the security gate and let the lost souls in. I've got to warn you, some of these guys are pretty far-gone alkies, so don't serve 'em if they've obviously had enough. We can get in trouble for that. And if they start any trouble, don't fuck around. Get rid of 'em. Do what you have to do but remember, callin' the cops is absolutely the last resort. Remember, if we leave the cops alone, they'll leave us alone."

With that warning, BJ went to the front of the bar, Al following. He then took a couple of keys from a large key ring and unlocked and rolled up the security gate. He gave the key ring to Al and told him to go back behind the bar. When Al had positioned himself, BJ called out loudly to the crowd of middle-aged men gathered outside.

“First call for alcohol! First man up to the bar gets his first drink on the house, seein’ as I’m in a good mood today!”

Instantly some six or eight seedily-dressed alxies made a mad rush for the bar, nearly trampling BJ in the process, pushing and shoving their way inside the swinging saloon doors like a bunch of housewives at the opening of a Macy’s White Flower Day sale.

“Who won, Al?” asked BJ when the dust had finally settled.

“I believe it was this gentleman,” said Al, pointing to a small man in a grimy sleeveless undershirt with a naked lady tattooed on one hairy shoulder.

“Ah, Shorty,” said BJ approvingly. “Haven’t lost none of your cunning, have you?”

“Not when there’s a free drink at stake,” replied that worthy. “I goes atween their legs afore they can make a move.”

Everyone laughed as BJ ceremonially poured Shorty his free drink—a boilermaker—and then Al took drink orders from the rest of them while BJ bade him farewell for now, saying he would return at about eight. Al surveyed the six serious drinkers seated around the bar and sighed. “All right,” he offered. “I’m Al. Let’s get acquainted.”

During the next few hours Al had made the acquaintance of Shorty McPugh, ex part-time night watchman now full-time tippler, and more of his ilk. By the time BJ returned, Al had listened to enough of their hard-luck stories to give him food for thought on his dinner break.

About the time Al was being so rudely awakened by BJ, Simona Wing was lying languorously abed in her room at The Madhouse, the artists’ commune at Page and Fillmore. She herself was just beginning to awaken and contemplate the possibilities of the day ahead after the rigors of the night before.

“Phew!” she thought to herself, gingerly twisting her neck one way and then the other. “I could sure use a good massage to work out the kinks. Dancing déshabille for a bunch of crazed frat boys is no bed of roses! But how else could a girl like me make a month’s income in three or four nights?”

Suddenly there was a loud knocking at the door.

“Simona!” cried out an agitated voice. “Are you in there? Are you awake yet?”

“I am now!” she retorted with some irritation. “Tim, is that you? Then get the hell in here and make yourself useful!”

The door opened hesitantly and Tim slowly walked in. He was big, but somewhat too soft and fleshy for a man only in his early 30’s. At six-foot two he towered nearly a foot over Simona, but his manner toward her was conciliatory, almost subservient.

He sat down heavily on the bed and let Simona run her fingers through his thinning blonde hair.

“Uh-uh,” she said, pressing a finger to his lips. “Don’t say a word, at least not yet. You may massage me here and here.” She pointed to her shoulders and back as she began slipping off the delicate oriental nightgown which was her only garment. As Tim began gently but firmly massaging her shoulders with his large but sensitive hands, Simona began to moan and squirm with pleasure.

“Ah,” she breathed. “That’s more like it! Now, why did you come over here so early anyway? You know I had an engagement last night.”

“I know,” said Tim contritely, “and I wouldn’t have bothered you, but I’ve got problems.” He stopped abruptly and looked at her questioningly, as if wondering how best to proceed.

“Well, go on, then,” she encouraged him.

“Okay, it’s like this.” Determination clouded his face. “You remember that lighting design I did for the Fault Line Theater in September? For that West Coast premier that was supposed to be such a blockbuster? Well, the show bombed and now the theater is in the throes of ‘administrative reorganization’. I can’t even find out if the Artistic Director still works there because nobody’s returning my calls. Consequently, I haven’t been paid and consequently I’m short of the rent. Today’s the second day of the month and that bastard realty company that manages my building starts charging interest on the third. Ten percent per day. I figured that since you worked last night you...”

“Tim, Tim, Tim.” Simona shook her head. “I’m disappointed in you. If I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times—get the

money up front, at least part of it. How many times have you been stiffed this year?"

Tim hung his head. "I've lost count, Simona. But it's not all my fault. Designing is the only thing I'm really good at, but jobs are hard to come by even in the best of times. And now that these arts budget cutbacks are getting really serious, it would be professional suicide to lose a job over something as petty as mere money."

"And real suicide to be without 'mere money'," mused Simona. She turned to him and said with an air of resignation, "All right, Tim, how much this time?"

"If you could just let me have a hundred I'd be all squared away," said Tim, now starting to work on her lower back. "That is, if you can spare it. How did you do last night?"

"Oh, it was wild!" she said with a lascivious grin. "You wouldn't believe some of the things they wanted me to do. And me just a poor naïve little girl from Minneapolis. Why, one of the guys, I think he was the captain of the football team..."

"Spare me the details." Tim groaned and clapped his hands over his ears. "I don't want to hear about it. Just tell me, did you make any money?"

"Of course I did, silly, and I was thinking about you the whole time. It's the only thing that keeps me sane. So yes, I can spare a hundred." She turned around and looked him in the eye. "But you've got to do something for me in return."

"Anything, Simona. You know your wish is my command," he said with relief, now starting to massage other parts of her as well.

"Not there!" giggled Simona, again squirming under his touch. "But on second thought, now that you've brought up the subject, so to speak, it wouldn't be such a bad idea. But first things first," she said seriously. "I've also got something to tell you. Last night, or rather early this morning, when I got home, who did I see standing out in front of The Madhouse deep in conversation but Rick and Wanda! You remember them, don't you? Rick the Relic, world's oldest hippie, and Wanda, winner of fine wet tee-shirt contests everywhere? I wonder what they see in each other. But anyway, Wanda started dishing the dirt about what's going on at Rick's favorite downtown dive, The Last Resort. It seems they've got a new

bartender who's not only so hunky you wouldn't believe it, but also some kind of mystery man as well. Rick seems to think he's some sort of guru. And Wanda, well, she's in love again! So I told her I'd meet her down there this evening and I want you to drive me down in that big stupid car of yours. Then we'll all go to the bar and have a few drinks. That'll give you the opportunity to scope him out and talk to him sort of guy-to-guy. Then later you can give me the man's opinion. Obviously, Rick's doesn't count. So, will you do it?"

"Sure, I'll drive you down. I'll even talk to the guy, what can it hurt? But do me two favors, Simona." There was a hurt look on his face.

"What?" she responded, a little surprised at his reaction.

"First, don't insult my car. I know it's big, but I can't fit in a Honda."

"Oh, OK," she said grudgingly. "I was half-kidding anyway."

"And second," he continued. "Don't go flirting with this guy, you know how it makes me feel."

"Don't worry, Tim. Wanda's got him all staked out. But it never hurts to look, does it?"

"Aw, Simona!"

"Come on, don't you know when I'm kidding?" She turned to him with closed eyes and pursed her lips. "You may kiss me now, you fool!"

And Tim did, without another word, and they both fell giggling onto the bed and didn't get up for a long, long while.

By the time Al had returned from his dinner break and relieved BJ for the night, he had made a decision. He looked around the bar in dismay. BJ had been right about the quality of his customers. Through a thick haze of cigarette smoke he could see twenty or thirty people, mostly men, middle aged or older. Most were conversing halfheartedly to one or two of their companions at the dozen or so tables and booths scattered around the large single room that comprised the public area of The Last Resort. The tone was predominantly that of depression and impotent, unfocused complaint. Though it was only a little after nine, a few of the older



and drunker were already face down on the table, having given up on reality for the night.

He quickly put on his apron, walked behind the bar and began clearing away the empties. The six bar stools were filled by the same customers who had rushed in at the opening of the bar five hours ago. They were clearly there for the long haul. "Listen up, gentlemen," he addressed them briskly. They looked up in surprise and immediately fell silent. "No matter what happens in the next few minutes, I want you to remain in your seats." As they mumbled their agreement, Al came out from behind the bar and walked purposefully in the direction of the swinging saloon doors where a nondescript man was just entering. Without hesitation, Al walked up to him and whispered something in the man's ear. As Al walked back toward the bar, the man began to speak in a loud voice.

"Hey, you bums!" he harangued the crowd. "What are you doin' in this crummy rat hole? C'mon with me, they got a place at Sixth and Mission just opened up. Clean and comfortable and they got a grand opening special—two for one all night! What do you guys say, are ya with me?"

A loud cheer arose from the bar's denizens. Within a couple of minutes even the unconscious patrons had been awakened by their compadres, and the bar had completely emptied out except for Al and his six regulars seated at the bar.

Without a word, Al walked over to the entrance, lowered the steel security gate and locked it from within. As he returned to the bar, the six men looked at him with apprehension.

"Uh, what's goin' on here, Al?" ventured a fat balding man whose name was Louie. He was wiping his perspiring face with a dirty handkerchief.

"Never mind that," said Al dismissively. "Gentlemen, if you will listen to me for ten minutes, your next drink will be on the house."

In spite of themselves, the men all cheered this announcement, for no matter what was going to happen, a free drink was, after all, a free drink.

After all the drinks had been poured, Al stood up on a stool behind the bar. When he had their complete attention he began. "Gentlemen, I want you all to think about why you are here tonight,

why you are here every night, and what your lives would be like if you used all this time and money to your advantage, instead of wasting it here on things that only depress you further.”

No one spoke. The men sat sipping their drinks with various expressions of disbelief and horror on their faces. As they sipped, Al continued. “Each one of you has had some disappointment, some tragedy in his life that has brought him to this place and time. I want each of you to go home and decide what to do with your life. Then come back at four o’clock tomorrow afternoon and tell me your plans. Your reward will be two drinks for the price of one. But you will receive two and only two. Then you will leave this place and do something with your lives for the rest of the evening and the following day. This policy will be in effect every day from four until six o’clock. We will call it ‘Attitude Adjustment Hour’. A sort of club, if you will.”

“But Al,” pointed out Shorty. “Some of us guys haven’t drawn a sober breath in years. How do you know we won’t just go to another bar? There’s a whole mess of ‘em in this town, you know.”

Al looked at Shorty pointedly. “But you won’t. And it will be worth the sacrifice. Trust me,” he said, looking each man in the eye in turn. “Are there any more questions?” he concluded as he went over to the door and unlocked and raised the steel security gate.

They all shook their heads, finished their drinks, and filed out into the night. It was only ten o’clock and The Last Resort had never seemed so empty. Al calmly took off his apron and walked out the door, locking the steel gate behind him. He stood on the sidewalk for a moment listening to the sounds of the City at night.

“And now comes the tricky part,” he mused to himself. “Where can I find some younger paying customers who know how to have fun?”

He started walking up Howard Street toward the heart of the fashionable SoMa district. He entered every restaurant, nightclub, and bar in the vicinity, saying mysteriously to the first few people he saw: “Just opened. The Last Resort. First and Howard. Exotic drinks. Fabulous fun. Pass it on!”

And they did, too, all wanting to be one of the first to discover a new SoMa hot spot. So by the time Al got back to The Last Resort,

about an hour later, a crowd of trendy fun addicts had already gathered around the place, peering in the windows and looking around anxiously for the doorman. Al pushed his way through the crowd, unlocked the security gate and rolled it up, revealing the old-fashioned wooden swinging saloon doors.

“Ooh!” squealed the crowd in unison, rushing inside. The fashionably dressed thrill seekers milled around the bar, closely examining the bare wooden tables and chairs, the red leather upholstered booths, and the scarred antique finish and polished brass rails of the bar itself.

“Oh, look,” exclaimed one spiky-haired leather-clad woman to her date. “How clever to decorate a bar with unfinished wood. It must be a new trend! Hey, there,” she called out to Al, who had just taken his place behind the bar and begun to serve drinks. “What do you call this style of décor?”

“I believe, madam,” said Al formally, “that the correct term is ‘nouveau-retro’.”

“Nouveau-retro?” she said with a puzzled look on her face. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that before.”

Al looked her in the eye. “Trust me,” he said simply.

Her face cleared and she gave him an impish smile. “Then I just need two things. A margarita...and your phone number.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

**A** I was so busy making and serving expensive tropical concoctions to the demanding throng of trendy customers that he failed to notice BJ walk through the door.

“Oh, hi Al, just thought I’d drop by to see how you were doin’,” he began and then his jaw dropped in astonishment. “Holy Mother of God!” he exclaimed. “Who are all these people? Where did my regular customers go? And why do all these drinks have little paper umbrellas in them?”

He looked around, his eyes glazed over, as if he had suddenly lost his grip on reality.

Al came around from behind the bar and put his hand on BJ's shoulder. "Now, Mr. Duckworth," he said soothingly. "You said the old crowd was beginning to depress you. Go and meet some of your new customers. And remember, we're charging three-fifty a drink."

"Three-fifty a drink?!" BJ spluttered. "And they *pay* it?"

"Sure," he explained. "It seems these people feel that if something is not expensive it has no value. They consider themselves to be of value, so they live expensively. And besides, you'll enjoy listening to some of them. They have the most interesting stories to tell."

While Al was explaining the changes at The Last Resort to BJ, Simona was riding downtown with Tim in Tim's gas-guzzling twenty year-old white Ford station wagon which she semi-affectionately called "The White Whale."

"Tim," mused Simona, 'suppose this new guy is everything Wanda says he is. What's he doing working for peanuts at a rundown dive like The Last Resort?"

"Patience, Simona." Tim was hunched over the wheel, centering his attention on the hills and the traffic flow. "I guess we'll find out pretty soon. Now shut up and let me concentrate. It's not easy driving in this city. These little streets weren't built for normal cars."

"Normal cars!" snorted Simona. "The only normal thing about The White Whale is that it's white. And in this town even being white's not so normal. Why don't you get rid of this antique and get a cute little Toyota pickup or something?"

Tim looked at her with exasperation. "I've told you over and over that I need this car for my theater work. Most of the places I work at just can't afford to hire a truck to haul around lighting equipment and scenery all the time."

"Yeah, Tim," retorted Simona with a smirk. "Just like most of the places you work at can't afford to hire a lighting designer either."

"C'mon, Simona!" urged Tim, looking hurt. "You know I've just had some bad luck lately, that's all. I'll get some good-paying jobs soon. You know I always do."

"You'd better," replied Simona a bit grimly. She turned and looked at him as if sizing him up. "You know, you're good to look at, a halfway witty conversationalist, and reasonably okay in the sack, but I'm not sure how long I can continue to afford you. I mean, the work I do isn't advertised in the paper (at least not the legitimate ones). I have to hustle just about as hard to find the work in the first place as to actually do it. Not to mention the fact that it can be dangerous out there for a delicate single girl such as myself..."

"Oh, come off it, Simona!" Tim replied with a laugh. "You know there's nothing else you'd rather do. Hmm, I'm just picturing you now as an administrative assistant wearing your cute little dress-for-success suit..."

"Oh, yuck!" Simona stuck out her tongue at him. "I'd slug you if you weren't driving!"

"We're almost there," said Tim with relief as he made a right off of Market Street onto First. "I'll find a parking place and you go in and order the drinks. I'm curious to see what this guy looks like."

While Tim and Simona were driving and arguing their way toward The Last Resort, in another part of town Rick and Wanda were doing much the same.

"I gotta hand it to you, Rick," Wanda was remarking, "your van has never run this good before."

"Yeah, it's totally amazing," he agreed. "I think Al has got some sort of a magic touch or something."

"Speaking of magic touches," she licked her lips. "I hope Al has some time tonight. I really want to get to know him better."

"Just be careful, Wanda. How much do we really know about this guy anyway? I mean, I dig him too, but remember last night? Every time we tried to ask him something about himself, something happened or he'd change the subject."

Wanda squeezed his arm. "Don't worry, Rick, I'll watch out. But I think I can take care of myself as many times as I've been hit on."

"Yeah, like with Crazy George," he reminded her.

"He's an exception. Built like a gorilla with a brain to match and a libido the size of Texas. You don't find that combination very often."

"Luckily," replied Rick. "Or I'd swear off of guys forever. Seriously though, I wish I could be with you and Al tonight, but I've got to see this guy about a sculpture he wants me to do. There could be some serious bread in this if I rap to him right. Give my regards to Al."

"I sure will. I know how you feel about him. How we both feel about him. For me, it's like he's sort of a part of me I never knew was missing."

"That's it exactly, Wanda, you hit on it! He makes me feel excited and suspicious at the same time. And yet safe and secure, too. And sometimes I'm just flat out in awe of him. What the hell's his secret anyway? And where did he come from?" By this time Rick was pulling up in front of The Last Resort's entrance on First and Howard.

"Maybe some day he'll give us all the answers," replied Wanda, getting out of the van. "Look, I promise I'll be careful. Pick me up right here by about one-thirty, okay, Rick? And good luck with your sculpture deal. Hope you make big bucks!" She waved to him as he drove off, and then she turned and went through the saloon doors.

"Wanda, my dear, how nice to see you again," Al purred smoothly as she approached the bar.

"Ooh, Al, how cute you look!" squealed Wanda. "That little red bow tie is just too much!"

"You like it?" asked Al a bit vainly. "It was Mr. Duckworth's idea. But I must admit I've become rather attached to it already. Now, what can I get you? We're having a special tonight on blended margaritas. Only three-fifty."

"Blended margaritas? Three-fifty? Is this The Last Resort or have I wandered into a Polk Street fern bar by mistake? Does BJ know about this? And what are all these trendy people doing here?"

"Slow down, Wanda," laughed Al. "Mr. Duckworth does know about it. In fact he just found out. I think the upgrading of the clientele took him a bit by surprise. Now, what'll it be for you?"

"Just a beer, I guess, Al," she replied, looking around at the bar patrons in wonderment. "It's going to take me some time to get used

to all these changes. And Rick—he'll shit in his pants when he sees this!"

Just then she heard a voice from the rear of the bar. "Wanda! I thought that was you. There's plenty of room in our booth back here. Come join us!"

"Simona? And Tim?" she yelled to them over the crowd. "I'll be there in just a minute!" She turned to Al. "When you get some time, come and meet some friends of mine. Back there." She pointed to the booth in which Simona and Tim were sitting. "The girl lives with Rick and me at The Madhouse. The guy's her boyfriend."

"Certainly, Wanda," replied Al. "By all means introduce me. I'm always eager to meet your friends." He smiled at her warmly and handed her a beer. "Besides, anything to oblige a customer."

Wanda melted, but managed to recover herself enough to pick up the beer and make her way through the crowd of people toward the booth in the back.

"Oh, Mr. Duckworth," Al called to the other end of the bar. "I think I'll take a little break now as long as you're here. That is, if you can stop chatting up that redhead for a minute and take over here."

"Huh? Oh yeah, sure, Al...be right there," BJ looked a bit flustered as he rejoined Al behind the bar. "A fascinating woman—she's an investigative journalist for the *Bay Weekly*. I'm trying to get her to do a piece on the bar, but she says she doesn't write for the Lifestyle section. Maybe you can convince her, you're good with women, and this place could use the publicity."

"I'll speak to her later, Mr. Duckworth. Right now, Wanda wants me to meet some of her friends." Al took off his apron and went toward the rear booth where Tim, Simona and Wanda were sitting.

As he approached, Wanda stood up. "Al, may I present my good friend, Mr. Tim Stuckey, and his girlfriend and my Madhouse mate, the fabulous Ms. Simona Wing."

"Charmed, I'm sure." Al shook hands with Tim rather formally, then turned to Simona, gently took her hand and kissed it suavely.

As his lips touched her hand, Simona felt an electric tingling which started at her fingertips but moved rapidly up her arms to her shoulders. She felt as if liquid fire were coursing through her veins.

She also felt more clear-headed and alive than she could remember feeling in a long time.

Within a second or two, Al had released her hand and was saying, "So, Ms. Wing, have you known Wanda long?"

"Oh, several years," she replied, struggling to pull herself together, but outwardly not missing a beat. "And please—call me Simona—all my friends do."

"I hope that will include me." Al looked deep into her eyes.

"Oh, Al," interrupted Wanda who had been watching with increasing discomfort. "Are you free after work tonight? There's something I need to talk to you about."

Before Al could answer her, BJ came strolling back to their booth with the tall redhead in tow.

"Mr. Duckworth!" exclaimed Al. "Who's watching the bar?"

"Nobody!" retorted BJ. "But it's still my bar and it's not even midnight yet and we must have made a ton of money tonight. So, to hell with 'em. Here's someone I want you to meet, Al. This is Ms. Phyllis Dean. She's the investigative journalist I told you about."

"Pleased to meet you, Ms. Dean," said Al, not offering her his hand.

"All my friends call me Phyl," she said with a laugh. "BJ was telling me that you just started as bartender here last night. And I was talking to some people here and everybody said they didn't know this place existed until tonight. So I was thinking, wow, what a coincidence. You show up and suddenly this is one of the happening night spots in town." She looked Al up and down approvingly, "Well, I guess I can see at least part of the attraction."

"I'm trying to get her to do a piece on The Last Resort for her paper," broke in BJ, "but she says it's not her department."

"Yeah, that's right," explained Phyl. "I'm more of what you'd call a hard news kind of girl. This is more of an entertainment or lifestyle kind of story. Tell you what I could do, though." She turned to BJ. "I could run it past our Nightlife editor. Let's see, what's the angle?" She tapped a front tooth thoughtfully with a long, black-painted fingernail. "I know!" She brightened. "Seedy bar becomes chic nightclub overnight. Interview with hunky bartender responsible. That's you, Al," she winked at him flirtatiously.



"Sounds terrific," said BJ. "Why don't you sit down here with Al and his friends and I'll get you a drink on the house."

As BJ ambled off toward the bar, Tim and Simona looked at each other in amazement. "I can't believe what's going on here," Tim whispered in Simona's ear. "What's all this 'hail the conquering hero' stuff. He's just a damn bartender."

"Shut up, Tim!" Simona hissed, while managing at the same time to smile and nod at Al and Phyl. "So, Phyl," she said in her best little-girl-from-the-Midwest voice, "you're a reporter, huh? I'll bet that's really exciting, and glamorous too. You must meet some really interesting people when you're out there tracking down that story. In fact, didn't I read your article in the Noe Valley Gazette a few years ago about '101 Ways to Turn On Your Lover on Valentine's Day'? I thought that was just so cute! Not to mention timely, and insightful too. I mean, who would have thought you could do so many things with whipped cream..."

"Actually," Phyl responded with a forced grin, "I don't work for that paper anymore and being assigned stupid articles like that is the main reason why." She drew herself up proudly. "I work for the *Bay Weekly* now as their Chief Investigative Reporter-at-Large. I don't make all that much money, but the work is great fun and very important too. Sometimes I feel like the whole Bay Area is my backyard."

"So," countered Simona, not letting her off the hook, "working on any big stories right now? Or is it too confidential to talk about?"

"Not too much happening at the moment," said Phyl, pretending not to notice Simona's tone. "But come to think of it, there was one interesting story in this morning's *Clarion*, of all places. BJ!" she called back to the bar. "Where's that drink you promised me?"

"Coming right up, Phyl," BJ yelled back. "Just tryin' to satisfy all these thirsty customers! Be with you in a minute!"

"You got today's *Clarion*?"

"Sure thing."

"Bring it over here, will you?"

BJ returned with a margarita in one hand and the paper in the other. "I think it's on page five," she said as she took the *Clarion* from him and draped it across the table. "Right, here it is. Look at this

headline.” She pointed to a half-column with a modest header that read:

*UFO’S IN SAN FRANCISCO?*

*STRANGE LIGHTS REPORTED OVER GOLDEN GATE PARK*

“Isn’t that fascinating,” remarked Simona.

Al turned a bit pale, jumped up on the table and began to intone hurriedly, “CWI—Cry of the Wounded Innkeeper—Last call for alcohol—You Don’t Have to Go Home But You Can’t Stay Here—Drink up, everyone!”

Everyone was looking at him curiously, including BJ, for it was only one o’clock in the morning.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

**B**J looked up at Al, who was still standing on the table. “Have you lost your mind?” he demanded. “What the hell are you doin’, closin’ up early, and on your first night at work, too?”

Al composed himself and climbed down off the table. “Mr. Duckworth,” he replied in a conciliatory tone, “I thought you were beginning to look a bit tired after the rigors of the night. And I must confess I am as well. And, since you yourself admit you’ve made ‘a ton of money’ tonight, I thought an early night wouldn’t hurt either of us.” He looked BJ squarely in the eye and continued. “If I’ve done anything wrong, I sincerely apologize. But I was merely thinking of your well-being.”

“Well,” said BJ, apparently somewhat mollified, “I guess there’s no harm done in closin’ early once in a while. But I sure hope we continue to get this kind of business.”

“You can count on it,” promised Al, putting his hand reassuringly on BJ’s shoulder. “Now, why don’t you let me clean up. I’ll get you a nice drink so you can relax.”

He made BJ a strong Jameson’s and soda and then returned to the booth where Tim, Simona, Wanda, and Phyl were still sitting, finishing their drinks. They were the last customers in the bar. “Sorry

for the early night," he told them. "But Mr. Duckworth's feeling a little under the weather. I'm afraid he's not as young as he used to be."

"That's all right." Phyl said, getting up. "I've got to go anyway. Thanks for the drink, BJ," she told him on her way out.

"Don't mention it," he replied. "Just see what you can do for us at that paper of yours."

"I'll get right on it," she promised, then went out the door.

As Al started to leave the booth, Wanda laid a hand on his arm. "Don't go yet," she pleaded. "I've got something I need to talk to you about."

"Another night, perhaps," replied Al gently but firmly. "I promised Mr. Duckworth I'd clean up the bar by myself tonight."

"Oh okay, maybe tomorrow night then," she sighed. To Simona she said, "I hope you guys don't mind giving me a lift to The Madhouse, but it's almost one-thirty and Rick hasn't shown up yet. I guess he's still talking to that guy about that big art project."

"No problem. Plenty of room in my car." Tim looked meaningfully at Simona, who made a face back at him. "It's parked only a few blocks away. I'll go get it, won't be a minute."

During the several hours they had been inside The Last Resort, however, the dark clouds that had been gathering all evening had suddenly burst into a torrent of rain. The balmy weather that had prevailed for the last few days was now just a memory, and a winter-like chill had descended upon the City.

Wanda and Simona stood shivering in the doorway waiting for Tim to bring the car around.

"Oh, that's just perfect!" muttered Simona. "I paid seventy-eight bucks for this dress!"

"Don't worry," said Wanda bravely. "A little rain never hurt anyone."

"Tell that to my clothes," Simona retorted, hugging herself and hopping about uncomfortably in the cold and wet. "And where is Tim with that big stupid car of his? I'm getting soaked and I don't like it!"

But by the time she had voiced this complaint, Tim pulled up in front of the door, jumped out of his car and opened the passenger door with a flourish. "Need a ride, ladies?" he asked gallantly.

Wanda and Simona piled into the car as if the devil himself were after them. While they both shook themselves like wet dogs, Tim expertly negotiated the rain-slicked streets and in a surprisingly short time they found themselves pulling up in front of The Madhouse.

"Well, Tim," said Simona. "I guess this is where we part company for the night."

"Yeah, just as well," he agreed. "I've got to revise some lighting plots anyway before I get to sleep. Maybe this new show's going to be a hit!"

"I won't hold my breath," she replied. "Just make sure you get paid up front this time, please?"

"All right, already," grumbled Tim, restarting the engine. "Point taken."

"By the way," Simona continued. "You never told me your impression of Al. After all, that was what I dragged you down there for. I mean, I know The Last Resort isn't exactly your scene."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Tim thoughtfully. "Is it just me or was there a better class of people there tonight? Every time you take me down there, all I see is a bunch of old alkies down on their luck. But that crowd tonight struck me as, well, hipper and a lot better looking than usual."

Simona whacked Tim with her rhinestone-encrusted handbag. "Al, you fool! We were talking about Al! Now tell me what you think of him and then you can go back to your lighting plots like a good little designer. Well?"

"Ow!" Tim rubbed his jaw and said in a hurt voice, "Give me a minute, I'm trying to think." He scratched his head uncertainly. "Well," he said finally, "it's hard to say. He's good-looking enough, that's for sure. And he's polite as hell. And he looks like he wouldn't have any trouble holding his own in a tough crowd. But he seems sort of, you know, distant. So what makes him any different from all the other good-looking guys in this town? Aw, don't tell me you've got some sort of crush on him!"

Suddenly Wanda burst into tears, jumped out of the car and ran quickly up the steps into the house.

“Now, what’s gotten into her?” wondered Simona. To Tim she replied, “No, you idiot, it’s not me, it’s Wanda. But thanks a lot. You’ve really been a big help.” She gave him a peck on the cheek and said, “Catch you later.” Then she jumped out of the car and ran after Wanda, entering the house by the side door and running up the stairs to the third floor as quickly as she could. By the time she got there, however, the door to Wanda’s room was closed.

“Wanda, what is it, what’s wrong?” she called out as she pounded on the door. “Come on, it’s Simona, let me in!”

“Okay,” answered Wanda in a choked voice, gulping down her sobs. Simona entered the room and saw Wanda lying face down on her bed.

She went over and put her arms around Wanda, cooing, “Come on, tell Simona what’s wrong. Was it something I said?”

Wanda rolled over and wiped her face with her hand. “No, Simona, it isn’t your fault,” she sighed. “It’s just that I feel so helpless, that’s all. It’s just...it’s just that Al’s the most gorgeous man I’ve ever met in my entire life.” Simona offered her a tissue. She took it gratefully, blew her nose, brightened a bit, and continued. “Did I tell you that when Rick ‘n me picked him up in the park last night, he slept on my shoulder all the way downtown? It was so great, all dreamy and cozy with his head on my shoulder, I wished it could’ve gone on forever...and then everything changed. He got a job at The Last Resort and all of a sudden everybody noticed him, everyone was saying, ‘There’s something about Al, there’s something about Al...’ Then tonight I went there to be with him and tell him how I feel, and he spends the whole evening gabbing with that bossy reporter and you and the rest of the women there! You know how lousy I am with words! I just can’t seem to be able to talk to him and get his attention. It makes me feel really left out, you know? And now, on top of everything, Tim thinks you’re hot for Al. I just want to die!”

She turned over and started sobbing again. Simona, not knowing what else to do, began to massage her shoulders. “Oh, Wanda! In the first place I’m not what you’d call hot for Al. Although there was a moment,” she said dreamily, “when he kissed my hand—remember that?—and I felt all weird inside.”

“Uh-huh,” agreed Wanda, sitting up, “I know what you mean. Like when he had his head on my shoulder I felt, just for a minute, really, like, happy and really together and—oh, I don’t know what I mean. It’s just so confusing!”

Simona stood up. “Listen, I’ve got an idea! Let’s go downstairs and see if Marty’s still up. You know he stays up late a lot of times to work on the household accounts and meditate. If anybody can put any of this into perspective, it’s Marty.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Wanda, slowly hauling herself off the bed. “But don’t you want to change clothes or something? You’re awfully wet.”

“Yeah, you’re right. But I don’t want to waste any more time. It’s after two in the morning now and, even if Marty’s still up, he’ll be going to bed soon. Do you have a robe or something I can borrow?”

“Sure thing,” said Wanda. Then she started to giggle. “You can even borrow my Kermit the Frog slippers.”

“Thanks,” said Simona, hurriedly peeling off her wet dress and pulling on Wanda’s proffered nightgown while Wanda changed into a pair of oversized man’s pajamas. “All right, I guess we’re presentable. Let’s go down and see if the lights are on in the study.”

As luck would have it, Marty Mathews, master of The Madhouse and father confessor for the 30-plus members of that chaotic commune, was still wide awake in the little room he liked to call his “study”. It was littered with books and papers and contained a small fireplace at one end and a large desk at the other. Smack in the center of the room were a number of large pillows on which people could recline, if they so desired, during the infrequent house meetings which, in fact, practically no one attended. The residents of The Madhouse had little use for structure, and Marty—although he exhorted the Democratic Ideal at every opportunity—was just as glad that they didn’t. “It’s hard enough trying to run this place,” he often thought, “without a lot of misguided idealism getting in the way.”

As he sat at his desk, once again going over the facts and figures before him, he wondered, as he frequently did, how he had kept this place functioning for over twelve years. Always in the red,

always one step ahead of the bill collectors—was that any way to live?

His musings were cut short by a tentative knock at the door.

“Who could be here at this hour?” he wondered. “Police looking for a runaway? Some friend or resident in trouble? At least bill collectors don’t work at two in the morning. All right, hold on, I’m coming,” he said aloud. “Who is it?”

“It’s Simona and Wanda, Marty. We need to talk to you.”

“OK, just a second.” He opened the door to find a red-eyed Wanda in oversized pajamas, and Simona in a strangely unsexy flannel nightgown and Muppet slippers standing in the hall.

“Ladies, what a surprise!” He held the door open and beckoned for them to come in. “What brings you down here at this time of night? Wanda, you’re not high on drugs again, are you?”

“No, no, nothing like that! At least everything’s okay in that department,” Simona reassured him. “But we’ve got a little problem we’d like your help with.”

“Well,” sighed Marty with an air of resignation. “I guess that’s what I’m here for. That and to pay the bills, of course. Which, incidentally, is looking more hopeless all the time. But a visit from two lovely females,” he looked at them with mock ardor, “in the wee small hours of the morning—now that’s what makes the job worthwhile.”

“Oh, Marty,” said Wanda with a laugh, “you always know the right thing to say.”

“So this problem—tell me all about it. No, wait!” He held up a hand, “Before you begin, what kind of problem is it?”

“I guess,” said Simona, unsuccessfully repressing a giggle, “you could call it a man problem.”

“Oh, brother,” sighed Marty. “This is going to take awhile. And at this time of night, too. Hey, I tell you what!” He brightened, hurried over to his desk, and began rummaging through the drawers. “What with the rain and all, why don’t we make a fire and light some candles. I’ll pop some popcorn, and we’ll have a regular slumber party. I see you girls are already dressed for it.”

Soon the fire and candles were giving off a reassuring glow as the girls lounged on the pillows, munching on salty greasy popcorn, and feeling more at ease than they'd been all night.

"So tell me, then, about this 'man problem' of yours," prompted Marty, popping open a beer.

"Okay," began Simona. "His name is Al..."

When Phyllis Dean left The Last Resort, her thoughts were not on Al, but on the UFO article she had just read in the *Clarion*. Like Wanda and Simona, she had not expected the sudden torrent and, likewise, was not suitable attired. "Damn!" she said to herself. "I know it's late. But rain or no rain, I've got to go out to the Park tonight. A good reporter never hesitates, but capitalizes on her opportunities. I can't wait until tomorrow when all the evidence (if there is any) will probably be washed away. But I can't go dressed like this. I've got to go home and change."

And so, head held high as the rain lashed at her, she walked bravely and purposefully toward Mission Street where she quickly and expertly flagged down a cab. Within minutes she had arrived at her tiny walkup Tenderloin apartment ("Just temporary until I hit the big time," she always said of her living quarters, although in truth she'd been living there the better part of five years.)

Once there, she divested herself of her wet clothes, briskly towed herself down, smoothed back her damp hair, and changed into her "ninja journalist" outfit—a black vinyl jumpsuit with matching boots and a black leather biker's cap. Then, arming herself with a flashlight and foreign-correspondent type waterproof shoulder bag containing one compact mirror, five hairpins, one change of socks, one reporter's notebook (with pencil), one audio cassette recorder, and one camcorder, she ran down the stairs and hailed another cab.

"Ninth Avenue and Fulton, driver, and step on it!" she barked with an air of practiced authority. In seconds the taxi was speeding west on McAllister toward the Park.

"...and then when he touched my hand I felt so weird..."

"...and the way he looked when he saw that UFO headline..."

"I'm sure that somehow he fixed Rick's van just with his mind!"



“...and the way he handled Crazy George...”

“...and he’s just so hunky!” the girls blurted out in unison.

For the first time in the forty-five minutes it had taken Simona and Wanda to tell Marty “The Story of Al” there was silence in the room. Outside the rain was still coming down heavily. Marty, who had quietly listened to the torrent of words, now got up and paced slowly over to the window. He looked at the rain outside for a long moment. Then he looked back at the girls.

“Well,” he said finally. “I guess there’s only one thing to do. Obviously, I’ve got to meet this guy of yours. But it’s got to be somewhere we can get him alone, so there won’t be any room for distractions or evasions.” He raised his fist decisively. “Ladies, your mission is to bring Al home for dinner!”

By the time Phyl got out of the cab across the street from Golden Gate Park and paid the driver, the rain was falling harder than ever. Still, without hesitation, she advanced toward the interior of the park, pointing her flashlight in front of her like a weapon against the dark. Soon the streetlights were behind her, and even with the flashlight she could see only three or four feet ahead.

And then, about a hundred yards in, she suddenly saw something that made her blink in disbelief. There, in the middle of a large meadow, was a faintly visible circle glowing with a phosphorescent green light. Stealthily she approached the circle, one hand swooping back and forth with the flashlight, the other deftly unzipping the bag over her shoulder and pulling out the camcorder.

So intent was Phyl on her big scoop that she never saw the black-gloved hand that suddenly reached out and grabbed her by the neck.

## CHAPTER NINE

**A**fter the bar was finally closed for the night, Al retired to his little room in the back and sat down on his cot. He looked out the window at the rain, his thoughts racing. Humans were such a strange sort of people, he mused. So technologically advanced, intelligent, perceptive. And yet it seemed to him that

something was missing in their makeup. For all their intelligence and sophisticated language skills, they seemed, for the most part, to be incapable of actually communicating effectively with each other—saying what they meant, for instance, really listening to each other and understanding what was said to them. “I must find out more about this paradox of their language capabilities,” he said to himself. “Maybe get up early in the morning and do some research.”

His thoughts were cut short by an urgent pounding on the back door that opened onto the alley. He got up quickly and unlocked the door, then pushed it open. There stood a young woman with long stringy hair plastered to her head by the rain. She was skinny to the point of malnutrition and was dressed in unspeakably filthy rags.

“Hi,” she said tentatively. “Are you Al? I was told I could find him here.”

“Yes,” admitted Al. “That’s me. Please, come in out of the rain. What can I do for you?”

The girl entered the room and looked doubtfully at the shabby décor. “I don’t know about this,” she said shyly. “Marjie told me you were a holy man.”

“Marjie? I don’t believe I know her.”

“You know,” she explained. “Marjie—Marjorie. The weird old lady who lives in the alley and drives everybody crazy with her meddling.”

“Ah, Marjorie!” he said, suddenly recalling last night’s visitation. “But who are you? What are you doing out here on such a rainy night? And what do you want with me?”

“I’m Suzie. Pleased to meet you, I’m sure.” She stuck out a grimy hand which Al shook rather gingerly.

“I’ll get right to the point,” she said, suddenly businesslike. “For weeks now I’ve been having these blinding headaches. They’re so bad that when I get them, it’s all I can do to keep from screaming or clawing out my eyes. Marjie sent me over here, said you had some kind of powers. Can you do anything for me?”

“Your Marjie is not as accurate in her assessment of me as she could be,” replied Al carefully. “But if you want your headaches to cease, there might be a way. What have you been doing to remedy the situation?”

"I've taken all the pills I could find and they didn't help at all!" She started to cry. "I know there's something really, really wrong with me. I can't afford to go to a doctor and the free clinics just make me wait hours and hours for more useless pills. So, I guess you're sort of my last hope. Is there anything you can do for me? Anything at all?" Dejectedly, she sat down on the cot, put her head in her hands, and began to sniffle.

Al handed her a paper napkin which she accepted gratefully. After she had blown her nose a couple of times, he said encouragingly, "Well, I'll try to help. But you have to do the work."

"Me!" She raised her head and looked at Al in astonishment. "If I could make it go away myself, don't you think I would, in a minute. Why would I even be here in the first place? You're making fun of me!" she said accusingly and got up as if to leave.

Al took her by the shoulders and pushed her gently down on the cot again. "What I meant was, you have to help me find out what's wrong and then, if it's possible, to help fix it."

She looked up at him and silently nodded her head.

"All right, then, if you will permit me..." He parted her sodden hair and placed the fingertips of his right hand lightly on the center of her forehead. "Hmm," he said after a few seconds. "Did you know you have some tissue in your brain that doesn't belong there?"

"What!!!" She jumped up immediately and began to run around the room like a mouse in a cage. "Omigod! Omigod! I've got a brain tumor! I've got cancer! I'm gonna die! You got to help me, Al!" She grabbed him by the shirt. "Please, please, I'll give you anything I got, just make it go away!"

Al gently took her wrists and led her back over to the cot. "Sit down, Suzie, and calm down. I think we can do something about this but, as I said before, you have to do the work."

She sat back down lifelessly and looked at him with dull eyes. "Okay," she said simply. "What do you want me to do?"

While this scene was unfolding at The Last Resort, Rick the Relic was still in the East Bay. He was heading toward the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, driving as fast as he could, considering the treacherous road conditions.

“Man!” he said to himself. “I’m in trouble now. I promised Wanda I’d pick her up at The Last Resort at one-thirty and take her home. It’s after two now and I’m not even across the Bridge yet. Fucking rain!”

A short time later he came to a stop in front of the bar. The front lights were off and the place looked deserted. “Shit!” he said. “Well, as long as I’m here anyway I’ll have a look around. She might be in the back, helping Al clean up or something.”

He got out of the van and walked slowly around the bar towards the alley, looking in each window as he went for signs of life. As he approached the alley entrance he saw a dim light coming from the window and heard a woman scream.

“Holy shit!” he cried out. “What’s going on in there?” He cautiously approached the lighted window and looked in. He saw a young woman running around the room screaming and grabbing at Al’s shirt. “Fuck! What the hell is Al doing to that girl?” He danced around the window for a minute, trying to decide whether to go in and confront Al, call the cops, or mind his own business and pretend it never happened. He had just about decided on the third alternative, when he heard a voice. It seemed to him that it was inside his head, but what it was saying made him pretty sure that the voice wasn’t his.

*Rick, it said calmly and expressionlessly, like a radio news broadcast, Open the door, come in, sit down on that crate over in the corner, calm down, and don’t say a word. Everything is all right.*

For some reason, he did what the voice told him to do, without protest.

When he was seated, Al nodded at him approvingly and turned his attention back to Suzie. “Are you ready?” he asked.

“Who the hell is your friend? He sure doesn’t say much, does he? Is he a zombie or something? Am I going to end up like that?” She began to get agitated again.

“Don’t worry about him,” Al reassured her. “He sort of, uh, needs help, too. I’ll attend to him later. Now, just free your mind of all fear and worry and concentrate on the problem at hand.”

“Okay,” she agreed, settling herself comfortably beside Al on the cot and closing her eyes. “Do your stuff, holy man!”

Once again, Al placed his fingertips lightly on her forehead. "Now," he began in a low, soothing voice, as if trying to put a baby to sleep. "I want you to imagine being in a beautiful place. There is no pain there, only peace and happiness. Concentrate, and when you have this picture firmly in your mind, describe it to me."

In a few seconds a smile began to form upon her lips and the pain lines around her eyes began to smooth, making her look quite a bit younger and almost beautiful. "I'm in a meadow," she said wonderingly. "I'm barefoot and the grass beneath my feet feels ever so soft! I'm wearing a beautiful peasant dress. It's springtime and warm and the flowers are so colorful and fragrant that I just have to pick a bouquet."

"All right," said Al, his eyes narrowed with concentration. "You're warm and happy and free of pain."

"Oh, yes," she said in a childlike voice. "Nothing can hurt me here."

"But something can," he said menacingly. "There is an intruder, an invader! Look around, and tell me what you see!"

"Oh, shit!" said Suzie, her face once again contorted in pain. "It's my ex-boyfriend. He's wearing his stupid leather jacket and his fucking boots. He's stomping all over my flowers. Make him stop!"

"Suzie," asked Al calmly. "Do you want him to go away and never come back?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied vehemently. "Stupid fucking men, always getting in the way!"

"Okay, I'm going to put a little more pressure on your head. Think of this as giving you the power you need to get rid of him."

"Right!" agreed Suzie, really getting into it now. "Smash that fucker!"

As Al gripped Suzie's head, she began to scream almost orgasmically. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" she yelled. "Get out of my head, you bastard, you don't belong here." She suddenly jumped to her feet, breaking Al's grip and putting her own hands to her face. She opened her eyes cautiously. "Yes, yes, I can feel the pressure going. I can feel the pain going. I can see! I can think! It's like I'm reborn!"

Slowly she began to relax, the tension being visibly released from her body. She went over to Al, knelt down, and put her head in his lap. Neither of them moved for a long time.

Finally Al said gently. "All better now?"

"I think so," she said, shaking her head gingerly to and fro. She looked up at him with awe. "Al, you are some kind of miracle man. What did you do to me?"

"Nothing. You did it to yourself. I only helped you focus your energy a little. Now, you said you'd give me anything."

"What...what do you want?" she asked him apprehensively.

"Just go in peace and don't talk about this to anyone," was the reply.

"Okay. If that's what you want." She smiled at him shyly. "But thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it," said Al brusquely. "Please don't mention it."

He opened the door and watched her go out into the alley. She was skipping through the rain screaming ecstatically, "Free! I'm free!"

He shook his head, closed the door, and turned his attention to Rick who was still sitting in the corner motionless in a druglike stupor.

Al clapped his hands. "So, Rick," he began, as if continuing a conversation between them, "as I was saying before you nodded off, you just missed Wanda. I think she got a ride with Tim and Simona. So, how did it go with your art project?"

"Oh, wow!" murmured Rick, rubbing his eyes as if trying to wake up. "I think it went okay. If I'm lucky I should make some serious bread out of this deal."

"Glad to hear it! But it looks like you're really falling out. Why don't you go home and get some sleep? I'm sure you'll find Wanda already there."

"Yeah," agreed Rick, getting up and yawning sleepily. "I guess I should go now. But wait," he said in confusion, as if trying to recall a dream. "Didn't I see you just now with some young girl? What was all that about?"

"Oh, you must mean Suzie. She just came to see me about her tension headaches. I know a bit about that sort of thing, and I'm

always glad to help whoever I can. You know,” he continued, going over to Rick and putting his arm gently around his shoulders, “I have a confession to make. You’ve done a lot for me, picking me up in the park, and getting me this job and all. And I feel as if I haven’t been entirely honest with you.”

“Yeah,” Rick’s face brightened. “I have been wanting to ask you about yourself.”

“Well, let me just say this. When I first met you I didn’t know whether or not I should let you in on my secret. But now that I know that you’re a spiritual dude yourself, I see no reason not to tell you the whole story.”

“Wow, this is so cool, Al!” Rick excitedly began to pace about the room. “I knew there was something going on with you! I mean, I don’t want to pry into your personal life or anything, but in the last couple of days I’ve seen you do some pretty amazing things.”

“Well,” Al replied, sounding like a man with a heavy burden on his conscience, “I came here to San Francisco because I had heard it was a really far-out spiritually heavy place. I’ve just returned from Tibet, you see, where I was initiated into the holy mysteries of their spiritual leaders. That was how I could help this girl with her tension headaches. That was how I could convince Crazy George to leave Wanda alone. It’s all due to mystic teaching. And I pride myself on being a good student.”

“Yeah, man, yeah! I figured it was something like that.” Rick stopped his pacing and grinned at Al. “This is so fantastic, bro. I wish you’d told me sooner. I mean, I can really relate to that spiritual stuff, you know. I have read every book by Carlos Castañeda, plus I used to be really tight with the Maharishi...”

“But you know how it is,” Al interrupted. He smiled bashfully at Rick. “This is the 90’s, after all. People are much more materialistic these days, and most of them seem to have no interest in spiritual matters any more. So I was a little embarrassed to admit that I had spent all that time learning what most people would consider a waste of time. At least here in the West, that is.”

“But I can dig it completely, man. You got to follow your own drummer, do your own thing. Don’t let all that material stuff bring you down...”

“There’s just one thing,” Al interrupted him, lowering his voice to a confidential whisper, and leading Rick to the door. “Don’t tell anyone about what I just told you. This is just between you and me, Okay?”

“Gotcha, bro!” Rick went happily out the door.

Al closed the door with a sigh of relief. “And now for some sleep,” he thought gratefully, “and not a moment too soon.” He sank onto his cot fully clothed and within moments was snoring blissfully.

## CHAPTER TEN

**B**ut as soon as had he sunk into a deep sleep an insistent knocking at the alley door immediately brought him back to full consciousness. “Oh, bother!” he said to no one in particular. “Who is it this time?”

As he unlocked the door yet again, a rather wet Marjorie burst in, shook herself, and sat down on his cot. “Well,” she said with a grin, pulling a plastic pouch containing tobacco, papers and matches out of a side pocket of her army surplus overcoat. She deftly rolled and then lit a cigarette. “I hear you met Suzie,” she continued after taking a few puffs.

“Yes, if one considers an absurd encounter with a street urchin a social occasion, I would have to admit that we’ve ‘met’,” replied Al with a shudder. Realization dawned in his eyes and he shook his finger at her. “You tricked me, didn’t you? You wanted to find out if I could heal the sick. What’s next, turning water into wine?” He smiled in spite of himself. “I suppose being a bartender, that might come in handy but, darn it, Marjorie, I’m trying to keep a low profile here, at least until I know my way around. Next time you want to send me any of your wretches, make an appointment!” He folded his arms across his chest and turned away from her.

“Now, Al,” was the good-natured reply, “don’t get your knickers in a twist. It wasn’t like that at all. Poor Suzie was wandering up and down the alley, moaning and groaning about her headache. Nobody could get any sleep. So, just to shut her up and get rid of her for



awhile, I told her about you. Is it my fault you decided to do your duty instead of turning her away?"

"No, I suppose not," returned Al, somewhat mollified. "But what do you mean, 'nobody could get any sleep'? How many people have you got out there in the alley anyway?"

"Well," she replied thoughtfully, puffing on her cigarette, "that depends on whether it's a wet night or a dry night. If it's dry, then there's only me and a few other regulars. If it's wet, though, like tonight, they come from all over. I could make a fortune selling them spaces if they had any money." She stood up and continued in a professorial tone. "You see, this alley is considered prime real estate by the homeless for three reasons." She ticked them off on her fingers. "One, it's nice and dark; two, it's nice and quiet; and three, almost all of the businesses have little awnings or roofs on their back doors which extend over the sidewalk. Therefore, it's nice and dry as well." She sat down again and said in a musing manner, "If you want to make a homeless person happy, just give 'em a nice dry place to sleep when it's raining, I always say."

"Someday," said Al in wonderment, "you and I must have a proper talk. I wish to learn more about 'The Homeless'. People who sleep in alleys. Have they nowhere else to go? I must also learn why you were so sure of my powers and where you think they came from."

"Why, as to that last thing," she said, "supernatural powers always come from God or the Devil. Everybody knows that!"

"So that if I have not been sent here by your God, then I must be in the service of the Devil? Don't you think that's a bit simplistic? To tell you the truth, Marjorie, neither of your concepts, God or the Devil, has anything to do with me." He stood up and began pacing around the room. "Did it ever occur to you that there might be a third possibility? That a natural person could do things most people can't? The way I see it, it's all a matter of what you believe." He pointed his finger at her suddenly. "Why, you don't even know for sure that I healed Suzie. In fact, as I was telling Rick only a little while ago, I simply used a technique of Tibetan medicine that has existed for centuries. So it's really no wonder at all that I was able to help her with a simple headache."

"Come off it, Al," she chuckled, standing up as well. "That girl had a tumor as big as a golf ball, you know that as well as I do. I can sense these things as well as you can, I just can't do anything about them. Part of my curse, I guess."

"All right," agreed Al wearily, sitting down again. "I might as well admit it. I do have some few powers along those lines, so perhaps one can deduce that I might not be strictly human. But what of it, what do you intend to do?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," she mused, stubbing out her cigarette on the windowsill. "But I do know that the people out there on the street need help more than your well-fed friends!"

"Well, then," said Al, the relief evident in his face. "Let's make a deal. Bring to me whoever needs help the most between the hours of three and five in the morning. I'll be here every day. Introduce them to me and then leave us. In return, I want your assurance that no one, including yourself and Suzie, will mention my name in connection with this, or otherwise intrude upon my life in any way. Is that understood?"

"Al, I don't know if you come from God or the Devil. But if you're willing to help my people and this is all you want in return, then we have a deal." They shook hands solemnly and then Marjorie continued, "Like my daddy always told me, 'Better the devil you know than the devil you don't'."

While Al and Marjorie were waxing philosophical, Rick was parking his van across the street from The Madhouse. "I wonder if Wanda's still up," he thought. "I really should apologize to her about standing her up. On the other hand, if she's really pissed, I should just let it go until tomorrow."

As he walked across the street to The Madhouse, he could see only one light still on—the one in Marty's study. "Oh, what the hell," he said to himself. "Marty's always good for a few laughs and a beer." He unlocked the front entrance and knocked on Marty's door.

"Come in," Marty called out. "Door's open!"

When he opened the door he was surprised to see Wanda, Simona and Marty, all lounging about on the large pillows that always covered the floor. They were in various states of undress,

intoxication, and emotion. Empty popcorn bowls, coffee cups and beer bottles littered the room. At the opposite end of the room, the last remnants of a fire glowed in the fireplace. A large television in the center of the room held their attention in varying degrees.

"Rick! Glad you could finally make it," was Wanda's sarcastic comment. "Where the fuck were you anyway? I got soaked waiting for your sorry ass!"

"Shit, I'm sorry, Wanda," Rick replied, entering the room slowly and gingerly stepping over dishes, pillows and bodies as he did so. "This art project I'm working on took longer than I thought. I'm really glad you made it back here okay."

"Shove it!" commanded Wanda, happily munching popcorn. "We're watching the Late Late Show. What's this movie called again, Simona?"

"*Now, Voyager*," said Simona out of the corner of her mouth. "And we're just getting to the good part, so shut up already!"

"I've got to talk to you for just a minute, Wanda," whispered Rick. "I went by The Last Resort looking for you and ended up having a talk with Al." He casually put his hands in his pockets and sing-songed in a childish way, "I know something you don't know."

"Come on, you shithead," said Wanda in a loud stage whisper. "If this is something important about Al, you better tell me quick if you value your cojones." She made a grabbing motion at his crotch and Rick retreated a few steps in alarm.

"Shut up, you two!" yelled Simona. "This is the part where he lights her cigarette!"

"Now, children," Marty remarked mildly. "It's only a movie, after all." And then he quickly ducked as two bowls of popcorn narrowly missed his head.

Meanwhile in Golden Gate Park, Phyllis Dean slowly regained consciousness, only to find herself bound to a tree by heavy iron chains. She could still see the glowing green circle that had attracted her attention, but how much time had passed, she could not tell. It was about fifty yards away from her and around it danced three sinister figures, all clothed in black leather. The rain had finally stopped and a pale gibbous moon was intermittently peeking out of

the clouds. It was so eerily quiet that by listening intently, she could just make out the conversation that was transpiring among the three dancers.

“Oboy, oboy, it’s stopped! Now we can have a bonfire!”

“Shut up, you, and just keep piling wood on the altar, while I find out what the story is with that broad over there.”

“You mean the one I knocked out and chained to the tree?”

“No, you idiot, the other one! How many broads are there out here tonight? One too many, if you ask me!”

The three sinister figures approached the tree where Phyl was struggling to loosen her bonds.

“Won’t do you no good to struggle,” offered the biggest of the three. “Them chains on you is good an’ tight!”

“Wha—what are you going to do to me?” whimpered Phyl. “What do you want?”

“That’s a good question. A very good question indeed.” The speaker was smaller than his compatriots but sizeable nonetheless. “But where are my manners?” he continued with a sardonic grin. “Let me introduce you to me and the boys. I’m Tom, this is my brother Dick, and this is my other brother Harry.”

The three of them bowed in a rather macabre imitation of high society.

“However,” said Tom, getting down to business, “the question of who you are and what you’re doing out here at this time of night still remains.”

“I’m Phyllis Dean. I’m a famous journalist. And I’m working on an exclusive story,” she replied with as much dignity as she could muster under the circumstances.

“Ah,” Tom sounded impressed. “Well, why didn’t you say so earlier? We could tell you a story that’d curl your ears, couldn’t we, boys?”

“Uh huh, uh huh, we sure could!” exclaimed the other two in unison.

“But this story, the one that brought you all the way out here—now what would that be?” asked Tom slyly. “It must be a real hot story to make a pretty lady like yourself come out here in the rain and all.”

This brought forth a chorus of lewd chuckles from Dick and Harry.

“Look, I’ll tell you all about it, okay? Just untie me and let me go. I won’t tell anybody I saw you guys out here. This story’s got nothing to do with you,” she replied desperately.

“I’ll be the judge of that, little lady.” There was a hint of menace in Tom’s voice. In a more friendly tone he continued, “Tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. You tell us yours and we’ll tell you ours. Stories, that is. Then, if we’re satisfied that you’re just an innocent bystander, we’ll unchain you and you can just walk away. No harm, no foul! okay?”

“Sure!” Phyl was relieved. “It’s a deal. “Well, mine—and you’re not going to believe this—I’d heard reports of a UFO sighting out here—thought it’d be a great scoop! So when I saw that glowing thing over there,” she pointed her chin at the green ring, “what is that thing, anyway?”

The three men shrugged their shoulders

“Don’t know,” said Tom. “Do you guys?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Not me.”

“So then, guess it’s our turn, is it?” asked Tom with an evil grin. Without waiting for an answer he continued, “Turns out, you’re in a fair amount of trouble. I just wanted to know your story to find out if you knew anything about us.” He looked up at the sky. “And now, since the weather seems to be clearing up a bit, the boys and me will be lighting the fire very soon. Oh yes! I promised we’d tell you our story. You’re not going to believe this, but we’re Satan worshippers and this is All Hallows Eve—the most powerful night of the year. We’re going to conjure up Satan, and as luck would have it, you’ve even provided us with a human sacrifice! This is going to be a memorable event!” He rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“No, you—you can’t do this! And anyway, Halloween was two days ago, on Wednesday. So I guess you’ll just have to call it off.” A desperate Phyl was obviously clutching at straws.

“Oh now, lady, you disappoint me. Haven’t you ever heard of a moveable feast? The boys and me all got jobs, so we can’t stay up all night whenever the fancy strikes us. So we choose to celebrate

the Black Sabbath on Friday, November 2, 1990. Let's see what happens when the hair begins to smoke and the flesh begins to burn. Before the sun comes up Satan will be flesh—and you won't be!"

Phyl began to moan and shudder as the fire was lit and the unholy threesome began to dance and howl.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

**A**fter Al had finally been able to get Marjorie out the door, he sank back onto his cot in exhaustion. "What a night!" he sighed. It was almost five in the morning and the rain had finally stopped.

As Al's body relaxed and his consciousness edged closer and closer to sleep's sweet oblivion, in his unconscious mind his alien senses were ever on the alert. Automatically he began to tune in on the thoughts of others, at first nearby. He heard the silent anguish of the homeless in the alley outside The Last Resort, then the sleepy dull buzz and occasional incoherent reverie of the downtown area. As his mind ranged farther and farther, he found himself listening in on the thoughts of the still-awake inhabitants of The Madhouse at Page and Fillmore, causing him to chuckle in his sleep. Finally, however, he found himself drawn to his earthly birthplace—Golden Gate Park.

Phyllis Dean was almost beside herself with terror. Still chained to the tree in the Park, she watched as the three satanic wannabees, Tom, Dick and Harry, lit a huge fire in the middle of the enigmatic glowing green ring. She could hear them chanting weird sing-song phrases, and every so often one of them stopped his dancing around the circle to throw something into the fire that made it burn even more brightly.

Their talk of a human sacrifice had made her deathly afraid, and she began berating herself mercilessly. "You had to be the big hero, the tough girl. You see where that's gotten you. These guys look like they mean business, so they're not gonna cut me any slack.

From the looks on their faces, they're more than ready to burn me alive to conjure up Satan. Oh, how I wish I was still back at that bar," she thought wistfully. "That bartender was kind of cute. What was his name? Al? Boy, I'll bet if he was here, he'd save me! He sure has the muscles for it. He'd walk over to this tree and break the chains with his bare hands. Then he'd knock those freaks out, throw me over his shoulder and carry me to safety! Oh, Al! Al! If only you could hear me!"

"Where the fuck is that ditzy broad?" Blair Brockman, Founding Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the *Bay Weekly* was restlessly pacing around his office. "Lyle, what time did she call in? And do you have any idea where she might be?"

Lyle, assistant to the chief, was sitting morosely in a corner of the office, finishing a cup of cold coffee. "I told you before, Chief, she called about two o'clock and said she was going to get a front page scoop on the UFO story. Said she'd be here by four. So that's when I called you 'cause I know you don't want me to make important editorial decisions on my own."

"Damn straight!" snorted Brockman. "If it were up to you we'd still be littering our front page with those insipid 'quality of life in the Bay Area' stories." He looked at his watch and pulled at his beard savagely. "But it's after five now, so where the fuck is she?"

"I don't know, Chief." Lyle squirmed in his chair, desperately wishing he were somewhere else. At times like this, he thought, becoming vice president in his father's insurance agency didn't look so bad.

"As you know," retorted Brockman, pointing his finger accusingly at Lyle, "we're on deadline. So if she doesn't get here pronto, whatever shit scoop she's got won't make next week's issue. So get ready to go with the alternate lead: 'Bay Area Outraged by Proposed PG&E Rate Increase'. When in doubt, stick with the tried and true, I always say."

"Come on, Chief, give her a few more minutes. She could have got delayed or something. I'll bet she'll be walking through that door any minute with a dynamite story."

That Lyle had a weak spot for Phyl and thought she was really sexy was common knowledge at the Weekly. It was Lyle who had talked Brockman into hiring her a few years ago on the strength of only a few novelty pieces in the neighborhood rags. And it was Lyle who always defended her frequent absences from the daily staff meetings. "She's a pro," he would say. "You can't expect a real journalist to keep regular office hours."

But Brockman was obviously on the warpath now. When he got in his put-up-or-shut-up mode, God help those who couldn't put up. Lyle closed his eyes and prayed for oblivion. Brockman just kept pacing.

Phyl was listening to her own thoughts veer shamelessly from sheer terror to erotic fantasies, when suddenly a voice not her own seemed to speak within her mind.

*Phyllis Dean, it said, Listen to me.*

"What! Who's there? What's going on?" Phyl cried out.

*This is a friend. The voice in her head was calm and self-assured. You want to be released from this situation, so listen carefully. I can hear you clearly if you just speak inside your head. Visualize the words you want to say as if you were reading silently.*

Okay, said Phyl, how's this?

Fine. Now, I understand that these men intend to do you harm. Trust me. When they come to unchain you from the tree, do not resist them. I promise no harm will come to you.

"Are you kidding!?" She cried aloud. "They want to burn me alive to conjure up the Devil!"

*Silently. Don't speak aloud. You must help me to help you, however. I am unfamiliar with this Devil they seek. Give me a picture.*

What do you mean?

*Visualize this Devil in your mind. As if you were recalling a picture.*

Okay. Phyl thought about all the pictures she had seen of devils in the occult books she had read in college. Does that help?

Yes. Now be brave. They are coming for you.



And indeed, Tom, Dick and Harry seemed to have finished their fiendish preliminaries and were advancing toward her.

“Okay,” said Tom. “The fire’s ready. You two unchain the bitch and feed her to the flames.”

“Oh boy!” Dick clapped his hands. “We’re gonna have a sacrifice, gonna call up Satan. But Tom,” he paused, looking slightly confused. “Tell me again why we want to call up Satan.”

“You nitwit!” Tom screamed in exasperation. Then he began to explain carefully, as if to a five year-old. “We want to call up Satan in order to serve him as his loyal subjects. In return, he will grant us everything we ever wanted here on earth in our lifetimes. Money, power, fame, chicks. Or do you want to be a tire inspector all your life?”

“No,” Dick replied, a bit uncertainly. “I guess power sounds okay to me.”

“How about you, Harry?” Tom asked sarcastically. “As long as we’re taking a vote, what do you say? A life of drudgery, or a life of luxury?”

Harry thought about it for a minute. “Uh, luxury, I guess.”

“Then we’re decided! Go get the girl!”

“Okay, Tom,” they said in unison and began to unchain Phyl.

“So, bitch,” Dick leered at her. “Are you ready to meet your fate?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Phyl with a shrug. “I guess there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“That’s right,” said Harry, trying for an evil laugh but producing a childish giggle, “you’re completely in our power!”

They finished removing her chains and led her to Tom, who was standing only twenty feet away from the huge bonfire.

“By the way,” Tom asked her casually, “you’re not by any chance a virgin, are you?”

“Are you kidding me?” exclaimed Phyl. “I haven’t been a virgin since I was sixteen!”

“Oh, well, it was just a thought. Virgins work better.” He jabbed her in the chest with his forefinger. “But you’re going to fry all the same! Boys!”

Dick and Harry grabbed her and pulled her toward the fire. Terrified, she began to scream and struggle desperately, but it was no use. Just as she began to feel the heat of the flames on her face, a shape began to materialize in the very center of the bonfire. It was bright red and shaped roughly like a large, powerfully-built man, but with horns, a pointed beard, forked tail and cloven hooves. It fixed the three Satan worshippers with a malevolent gaze and began to speak inside their heads in a deep, powerful voice.

*Do you know who I am? it boomed. I am the Lord Satan! Why have you summoned me here?*

Tom immediately prostrated himself upon the ground and motioned to his two brothers to do likewise. "Oh, great Lord Satan," he began. "We are here, your humble servants, to do your bidding. We sacrifice this woman to you that we may taste of your power and glorify your name on earth."

*You fools! it cried. Why do you bring me the uninitiated in the form of this girl? Do you think it pleases me?*

"But Lord Satan," pleaded Tom, "we thought but to honor you!"

*Taking souls without their choice and free will is repugnant to me, it said. But I will forgive you, for I know your desire to worship me is real. Therefore I will allow you to choose one of the three of you to sacrifice yourself to me, to reign by my side in Hell. For the other two of you, there will be riches beyond your imagining for the rest of your lives, after which you too will serve me in Hell. So, on which one shall I bestow the honor?*

"This isn't going right, Tom," complained Dick, twisting his hands together. "Did he just say one of us has to be sacrificed?"

"Shut up, Dick," cried Tom in frustration. "I'm thinking. I'm thinking maybe this wasn't all that great an idea in the first place. Either of you want to be sacrificed to Satan?"

"No!" said Dick quickly.

"Not me!" said Harry just as quickly.

"Then I've got another idea," said Tom even more quickly. "Let's run for it!"

And the three of them ran out of the park as fast as they could.

As Phyl stood there by the fire, dumbfounded by this turn of events, the image of Satan slowly faded into nothingness. As it did

so, the fire as well quickly burned down into a pile of smoldering ashes that soon died out into darkness. As the pale dawn slowly crept over the meadow, only the glowing green circle remained.

“That was too weird!” she said to herself. “I’m getting out of here.” She could no longer hear any voices in her head. “Was it just stress? Or was I hallucinating the whole thing? Or did something really get inside my head and save me? The Devil, the voices, was any of it real? I don’t know, but I’m sure not hanging around to find out!”

As Phyl quickly made her way out of the park, she saw the sun just beginning to rise.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

As Phyl walked slowly back down Fulton toward the Haight, the sun was just beginning to rise above the treetops. She was still trying to clear her head of the weird and terrifying events of the previous night. While part of her mind was remembering the strange voice in her head and the glowing image of Satan, another part of her was already writing and rewriting her big scoop.

She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she failed to pay any attention to where she was until she had automatically crossed Stanyan and turned on to Haight Street. By then the sun was almost fully risen. “Oh my God,” she thought to herself. “What time is it anyway?” She checked her watch. “After seven! Jesus, Brockman’s gonna bust a gut! It’s been over five hours since I called him about my big scoop. Deadline was an hour ago. Shit! I’ll be lucky if I don’t get my ass canned! Where the hell’s a pay phone?”

She quickly found one outside the huge McDonald’s on the corner of Haight and Stanyan. She fumbled through her pockets for the correct change, then speedily punched in the number of the editorial office of the *Bay Weekly*.

On the first ring a voice answered. “*Bay Weekly*, Sanders, Assistant Editor, speaking.”

"Lyle, is that you?" cried Phyl. "Listen closely! I don't have much time. This is Phyl. I've got that story and I'm coming in. Is Brockman really pissed?"

"Phyl!" exclaimed Lyle, the relief evident in his voice. "I'm so glad to hear from you! Are you all right? I was getting really worried..."

Brockman, who had been pacing the room in a frustrated frenzy, quickly grabbed the phone from Lyle and yelled, "Dean, is that you? You got exactly five seconds to explain why you missed deadline or, so help me, you'll be back to writing reviews for the Gay and Lesbian Film Festival!"

"Don't worry, Chief, I've got the story! Hold the presses or stop the deadline or whatever you guys do. I'm bringing it in. All I need is thirty minutes to get it written. It's already in my head."

"You better get in here quick," snarled Brockman. "I can only hold off for another hour starting ten minutes ago. And don't call me Chief! This better be the UFO story of the century!"

"Right, sir, except it, er, sort of isn't a UFO story after all."

"What!" exploded Brockman. "Then what are you wasting my time for? What the hell kind of story is it?"

"You're gonna love this, Chief," replied Phyl with obvious relish. "How's this for a lead? 'My Night of Terror with the Devil Cult—A True Story'. By Phyllis Dean, Investigative Reporter."

And without waiting for a response, she hung up the phone. Within two minutes she was in a cab, speeding toward the office of the *Bay Weekly*.

At about three that same afternoon, Al was just waking up, still groggy from his exertions of the previous night and early morning. He rose unsteadily from his cot and went over to the little wash basin in the corner of his back room at The Last Resort, splashed some cold water on his face, and blinked several times in a disoriented manner. "If that was a typical night on earth," he thought as he dried himself off, "I will definitely have to make some changes around here. Oh, well," he said philosophically to the overflowing trashcans outside his window, "today is another day. What is this, the second or the third?" he mused. "I'm beginning to lose track."

By four o'clock he had awakened sufficiently to be in a more cheerful mood, thanks to a cup of black coffee, which he found he liked, and a makeshift cold shower, which he found he didn't. Dressing himself in his bartender's costume, including the little red bow tie which Wanda thought was so cute, Al went out the back door into the alley and around to the front to unlock the security gate and open The Last Resort for another day.

As he came around the corner he was surprised to see a line of about six or seven men, patiently waiting for the bar to open. He recognized Louie, Shorty and most of the others as BJ's regular customers from yesterday. What surprised him most, however, was that they were all clean-shaven and wearing neatly pressed shirts and pants of a singularly spotless nature, quite opposed to their unshaven slovenliness of the previous day. They looked more like a group of job applicants than alcoholics waiting for a drink.

"Well, gentlemen," said Al, unlocking the gate. "A bargain is a bargain. Come in and sit down and I'll take your drink orders in a minute."

"Uh, Al," said Louie tentatively, "don't you want to hear what we did last night?"

"All in good time," replied Al. They walked into the bar and sat down on their respective stools in an orderly manner, politely calling out in turn to Al their various alcoholic requirements. He busied himself in pouring the requisite number of shots and beers and then continued in a serious manner, "I already know the two most important things: One, none of you took another drink last night or today and two, you all spent last night and today doing things that you haven't done in years. I do wish, however, to hear all your stories individually, and you may relate them to me one at a time in turn after your first drink. But first, is there anyone to whom what I just said does not apply? Anyone whom our little, ah, experiment displeased?" He looked at each man one by one, daring him to reply.

Finally Shorty broke the silence. "Gosh, no, Al," he said respectfully. "Fact is, we all talked it over while we was waitin' outside and damned if we all didn't do just about the same sort of things. You're right in what you said, too, that none of us has had a

drink since we left here last night, and it ain't for want o' opportunities, neither. Ain't that right, boys?"

General murmurs of accord came from the group as they quickly and gratefully downed their shots and gulped at their beers.

"So, who wants to go first?" prompted Al. "You, Louie? Or Shorty?" He called the names of each of the men in the order in which they sat at the bar. "Sammy? Norman? Lefty? Swifty?"

"How about me?" said a defiant voice from the very end of the bar. It belonged to a short skinny man with long flowing white hair and a beard to match. His eyes were bright and lively, however, giving him an unusually youthful appearance for a man his age.

"I beg your pardon, sir," replied Al politely. "I didn't see you come in. In fact, I don't think I've met you before. Were you here last night?"

"No, I wasn't!" snapped the little man. "I been out o' town. But the boys here all know me. Don't you, boys?" he said with a scowl.

"Sure, Mick," agreed Louie nervously. "We've all of us knowed him for years, Al, so give him a beer on me." He turned to Al with a pleading look in his eyes and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Mick don't know about our little, ah, arrangement."

"Damn right I don't," growled Mick. He grabbed the beer that Al had set in front of him and finished half of it in a gulp. He looked at each of them in turn and shook his head in disbelief. "What have you done to these boys? They all looks like they been con-verted by the Starvation Army. Does Duckworth know about this?"

"Yes and no," said Al diplomatically. "We both agreed that the well-being of these fine gentlemen here," he swept his hand up and down the bar, "was beyond any mere commercial considerations. And these gentlemen all agreed with us. Didn't you, men?" He looked at each one as if for confirmation.

"Sure, Al," answered Shorty, right on cue. "We thought it over and over and decided we was spendin' too much time in here getting drunk when we should be getting on with our lives, as they say in the magazines."

Mick gave them all a look of astonishment. "I don't believe it!" he said with mock pity. "This here new bartender's broke your spirit. He wouldn't be getting away with this if Fast Eddie was here. Now

there's a man who's good to his customers. Fill up your glasses as quick as you could empty 'em and every third drink on the house. Why I recollect the time... Hey!" He stopped short and looked at Al suspiciously. "Where is Fast Eddie, anyway? Comin' in later as usual, I hope?"

"Uh, I believe," began Al delicately, "that Mr. Duckworth discharged him."

"No!" cried Mick. "Eddie was one o' the best! Now what'd he go and do that for?"

"I think, perhaps, that it would be better if Mr. Duckworth told you himself. He'll probably be in soon. In the meantime, however," Al gave Mick a meaningful look, straight in the eye, "I'd like to make a bargain with you."

"A bargain! That's more like it!" exclaimed Mick, now placated. "Buy me another beer and let's discuss it like gentlemen." He paused and searched in the pockets of his army surplus khakis and finally produced an ancient briar pipe which he immediately began stuffing with coarse, black, foul-smelling tobacco. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he withdrew a kitchen match of the strike-anywhere variety and applied it to the sole of his shoe in the time-honored manner. He then passed the flame over the tobacco and began puffing away very loudly. When the pipe was drawing to his satisfaction, he took a large gulp of his second beer, leaned back on his stool and sighed contentedly. "Go on," he encouraged Al. "I'm all ears."

"Well, it's like this. Every day at four o'clock we have what we call 'Attitude Adjustment Hour'. Each member gets two drinks for the price of one and leaves at six o'clock, promising not to return until four o'clock the next day or to touch another drop of liquor in the meantime. Now if you were to join our little club," he leaned over close to Mick and spoke in a confidential manner, "since you seem to be a special friend of all the gentlemen in our club, I tell you what I'm going to do, Mick." He looked intently into Mick's piercing black eyes. "For you, both drinks will be free! Every day!" He leaned back and smiled broadly. "Now, what do you think of that?"

Mick's eyes widened. He blinked once or twice, as if he were just waking up. "That sounds real good to me, Al," he replied with

enthusiasm. “And I think this is a mighty fine thing you’re a’doin’ for all of us as well. To your health, Al!” Mick raised his glass dramatically and motioned to the others to do likewise, which they quickly did. As they all drained their glasses, Al made a slight bow to the group and then, as if embarrassed by their attention, began to vigorously polish the bar.

At The Madhouse, meanwhile, Marty Mathews was presiding over an emergency strategy meeting in the first-floor dining room. Around a long formal dining table were gathered several of his senior and most trusted housemates. They were senior because they had lived there the longest, in some cases upwards of six months. They were trusted because they occasionally paid their rent and, for the most part, caused a minimum of trouble.

“All right, all right, settle down,” Marty called out to the group when they had all taken their seats and their talking and giggling to each other had somewhat decreased in volume. “I think most of you know why I called this meeting. After I explain its purpose, outline our objectives, and mention various possible strategies, I’ll summarize briefly, and then those of you who are directly involved can have the floor.”

“Get on with it, Marty!” exclaimed an impatient voice from the end of the table. “It always takes you ten minutes to say what any normal person could in three. I’ve got a tarot reading to do at five and it’s after four now.”

“Okay Violet, keep your shirt on! I’ll be as brief and concise as possible. I know how important these readings are to you.”

“You better believe it, Marty, it’s the way I pay the rent around here,” she replied, rejecting his attempt at appeasement.

“So,” said Marty, trying again. “As I was saying before this highly unnecessary interruption...”

“Cut to the chase, Marty!” interrupted Wanda, who was sitting between Rick and Simona, “or we’ll be here all day!” She stamped her foot impatiently for emphasis. This prompted a general foot stomping among the members of the meeting, who seemed eager to show solidarity for one of their own.



"All right, that's it, I give up!" Marty threw up his hands in mock exasperation. "You tell it, Wanda, or you, Simona. Anybody but me, it seems!"

"Okay, I will," said Simona, rising from her seat and taking charge. "Here's the situation. Wanda, Rick and I met this really mysterious—but hunky—guy a couple of days ago. Rick helped get him a job as bartender at The Last Resort downtown."

"Oh, yeah," interrupted a beefy black guy from the other side of the table. He was dressed in denim and leather and wearing the colors of a local motorcycle club. "I know that place. Friends of mine get thrown out of there all the time."

"Shut up, Bear," said Simona kindly. "We'll get to your barroom stories later, time permitting. Anyway, the three of us think there's something really intriguing and different about the guy. So we asked Marty what should we do, and Marty said we should get him to come here for dinner. Isn't that right, Marty?" She turned to him and smiled sweetly.

"Oh, so now I'm allowed to speak?" asked Marty sarcastically.

"Just say yes, Marty!"

"Yes," obeyed Marty, making a zipping motion over his lips.

"Good man," she said approvingly. "Now, here's the deal. We don't want a repeat of what happened last time we invited someone here for dinner. You guys remember? When that little girl upstairs, you know, the poet—what's her name, Marty?"

Marty reached into his pocket and took out his handy, up-to-date Madhouse roster and consulted it. "Uh, Fawn—Fawn Zelinsky," he replied. "That dinner party was about three months ago, right after she moved in."

"Anyhow," continued Simona, "you remember she came to us and said 'I think I'm falling in love!' You know, in that soulful, poetic way of hers, and begged us to invite her prospective fella to dinner?"

"I remember it well," agreed Violet. "How were we to know that her great love was an investment broker from Orinda—with politics to the right of Reagan?"

"He was kind of cute, though..." began Wanda.

"I remember it better," broke in Marty. "We made the mistake of inviting everyone in the house to attend. So naturally, the worst

elements showed up 'cause they're always the hungriest. After they'd drunk about a bottle and a half of Night Train, Red and Peacock started a food fight with the dinner rolls and unfortunately it escalated from there. I was cleaning dried mashed potatoes off the walls for weeks."

"Yeah," put in Rick, "and when he saw the wine stains on his tan Armani suit, Fawn's guy turned three shades of purple and ran out of the room. Fawn never heard from him again. She says he even changed his phone number. She didn't speak to any of us for weeks."

"Good thing we didn't offer him a joint," remarked Bear.

"So," summed up Simona, "since we don't want to make that mistake again, I propose that this time we make it a closed dinner. Admittance by invitation only. We'll only invite about ten or twelve of our most sedate, coherent and presentable denizens. Marty will make up the list."

"Right, Simona, good idea," Marty agreed. "And you and Wanda invite this bartender—his name is Al, by the way—and let me know as soon as possible what day and time is good for him. I think this time we'll have roast pork and baked potatoes," he mused. "They're not as hard to clean up."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“**A**nd now, gentlemen,” said Al as he served everybody their second round of drinks, “tell me your stories. Except for you, Mick,” he added. “You don’t have one yet. Who wants to go first?”

Three or four of the men raised their hands at once. One of them, oddly enough, was Mick.

“If you have something to tell us, Mick, then by all means do so.” Al said, obviously curious. To the others he said, “If you gentlemen wouldn’t mind Mick going first.”

The other three who had raised their hands nodded in assent.

Al looked at Mick who then laid down his pipe and began to speak. “I know that I don’t strictly have a story to tell in the same way

that these fellas do. But I want to be a part of this here club, I do, so to show you I'm sincere I'm gonna tell all you boys about my life so far."

"This must be on the level, Al," Lefty said in a low voice. "I been drinkin' with him in this bar for goin' on three years now and he never says nothin' about his personal life."

"As I was sayin'," said Mick pointedly, shooting a withering look at Lefty, "I been pretty much a failure all my life. I was too wild to get much of an education, and I loved the sauce too much to hold a job for very long. So now I live mostly hand-to-mouth, makin' the rounds o' the temp day-laborer jobs in the mornin', then hittin' the bars on the afternoons when I ain't got no work, and then sleepin' in the alleys when I can't find a desk clerk who'll take pity on me an' let me sleep in the lobby at night." He relit his pipe, took a few puffs, and then continued. "But since I met you, Al, and kinda joined this here club o' yours, I feel like things are gonna change for me. I feel kinda different somehow. It's sorta like getting religion only there ain't no phony preachin' or hymn singin'." He finished his beer and slammed the mug down on the bar decisively. Then he stood up and addressed the entire bar. "I'm gonna go back to the Tenderloin now, and I just know someone'll give me a room so's I can get myself cleaned up and look for a real job tomorrow. Then, when I'm a workin' man with a steady income an' a decent place to live, in the evenin's I'm gonna finally start on that book I always wanted to write."

The other men at the bar greeted this apparently heartfelt confession with spontaneous shouts of "Good for you, Mick!" and "Go get 'em, old-timer!"

Al merely grinned, looked at Mick and shook his hand. When he let go, Mick was holding a twenty-dollar bill. "I hope," Al told him, "that this will help you get your room."

Following Al's lead, the rest of the men quickly dug into their pockets and soon Mick was the proud possessor of nearly thirty-two dollars, a down payment on his redemption.

After Mick had left the bar, sent on his way by good wishes and pats on the back from everybody, the other men looked at each other and then at Al.

“Well, Al, I don’t think none of us can top that,” ventured Louie, downing his second shot with a bemused look.

“Nevertheless,” rejoined Al, “each of your experiences is of equal importance. This is not a contest in which each person tries to outdo the other. So what’s your story, Louie? You had your hand up before.”

“Nothin’ that dramatic,” said Louie with a shake of his head. “But I got to thinkin’ last night. You know, about the past—the good times an’ the bad. So I decided to call up my wife—we been separated for years. She says it’s on account o’ my drinkin’. I always thought it was just an excuse. So like I say, I called her up, an’ it seemed like she could hear somethin’ different in my voice, I don’t know, maybe somethin’ more sincere. So she starts talkin’ about how she was lonely since I been gone and maybe I ain’t such a bad guy after all. So then I tells her the story o’ The Last Resort Club and pretty soon we’re talkin’ about getting back together again. We’re gonna meet somewhere next week an’ talk about it seriously and I want to bring her down here, Al, if it’s okay with you. I want her to meet one of the best friends a guy ever had.” He lit a cigarette and puffed nervously at it while he waited for Al’s answer.

“Of course, Louie. I would be delighted to meet your wife right here any day. During regular club hours, of course.” He turned to the others. “Now then, who’s next?”

Each of the five other men had a similar story to tell. It seemed that Shorty had got his old night watchman’s job back, and the others had all been out pounding the pavement in search of employment. Each of them claimed they had not felt so good about themselves in years.

After they all had finished their similarly inspirational stories, Al began clearing away the empty shot glasses and beer mugs. It was nearly 6:00. “So,” he said, turning his head toward the door, “until tomorrow, gentlemen?”

“Sure thing, Al,” said Sammy, getting up from the bar along with the others. “And I hope by then we’ll have some good news to report, job-wise that is.”

“I’m sure you will.” Al energetically polished the bar. “Just remember—the habits of years are hard to undo in a few days. It

may take some time, but I know you gentlemen will succeed. I have faith in you.”

The six drinking companions filed out of the bar into the deepening November dusk, laughing and joking with each other as lightheartedly as schoolboys.

When they had all left, Al emerged from behind the bar and quickly went over to lock the steel security gate at the entrance. “And now to change this place once again from The Last Resort—Seedy Alcoholics’ Bar, to The Last Resort—Nightclub for the Hip and Trendy,” he said out loud with a laugh.

He went to the back storage room of the bar and brought out a number of old-time posters and wooden plaques from the Old West. The latter were printed with inspirational sayings such as: “All Firearms Must Be Checked at the Bar” and “Beer—5 Cents a Mug”. He hung these at numerous opportune spots on the walls and then, reaching under the bar, brought forth a large box full of variously colored light bulbs, with which he replaced most of the harsh white lighting.

“Let’s see,” he mused, idly leafing through The Bartender’s Guide to Popular Mixed Drinks that BJ had given him yesterday. “What will be tonight’s special? Last night it was margaritas.” He surveyed the liquor shelves behind the bar. “Hmm, we seem to be overstocked with rum. So,” he pulled out a large poster board and began to write on it with colored pens: “Fresh Fruit Daiquiris—Your Choice—Tonight Only—\$3.50”. He hung this sign on the wall behind the bar, covering up the old faded one which promised “Shot & Beer—\$1.75”. “Now, all I have to do is go out and purchase the fruit.” He rinsed off his hands, removed his apron, and went out the back way, whistling as he went.

By the time he returned, laden down with large quantities of strawberries, bananas, peaches and other blendable fruits, it was almost eight o’clock and time to open The Last Resort to the waiting horde of young trendies.

As he once again unlocked and raised the steel security gate, he noticed that there were even more fun-seekers waiting outside than there had been last night. Drawn by their enthusiasm for new places and experiences, not to mention Al’s friendly, unassuming

manner and rugged good looks, many of last night's celebrants seemed to have brought a friend or two. As the crowd pushed their way in, he hurried around behind the bar and soon was up to his elbows in margaritas, daiquiris, tequila sunrises and many other varieties of sweet, fruity, but powerful concoctions, which he made with a deftness and rapidity which would have been startling in a seasoned bartender, let alone one with no training and working only his second shift.

By the time the initial rush had slowed down a bit, about an hour later, and Al was able to catch his breath at last and look around him, he caught a glimpse of BJ, who was just strolling through the swinging saloon doors.

"Al!" BJ greeted him with a look of surprise. "Where in the name of all that's holy do all these young people come from? It's even busier than it was last night, and it's barely nine o'clock. How on earth are you able to keep up with all these drink orders?" He took off his coat and started looking around for an apron, saying, "Here, you'd better let me give you a hand."

"Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Duckworth," replied Al calmly, all the while blending drinks, pouring them into glasses, serving them, taking the money and returning the change in a manner that managed to seem at once attentive, yet automatic. "Everything is under control." He blended and poured a peach daiquiri for a young blonde woman in the twinkling of an eye, smiling at her and thanking her sincerely when she told him to keep the change from a five. "Now, what can I get for you? Ah, yes, now I recall," he said before BJ could answer, "Jameson's on the rocks with a splash of soda. Here you are."

No sooner had Al mentioned BJ's favorite drink than it appeared in front of him, seemingly out of nowhere.

"This is totally amazing, Al!" said an astonished BJ, sipping his drink cautiously as if he doubted its reality. "I don't believe my eyes! How did you do that?" He licked his lips approvingly and took a healthy swallow before continuing more calmly. "You told me that you had no previous bartending experience, yet here you are, slinging drinks to a crowd like this as good as any pro. And fancy blended drinks, at that. And where do you get these cute little paper

umbrellas?” He eyed the strawberry daiquiri that the purple-haired woman standing next to him at the bar was drinking.

“I got them from you,” grinned Al. “It seems there’s an old storeroom in the back that opens to a key on the set you gave me. When I went in there I found boxes and boxes of decorations and bar supplies, including fancy glasses and what the label on the box calls ‘Mixed Drink Décor’—little umbrellas to you, Mr. Duckworth.”

“Ah, yes, now I recall,” said BJ, smiting his head with the palm of his hand. “The old storeroom. I’d almost forgotten. You know, when my customers began getting older and more set in their ways, several years ago now, all they seemed to want was the same old shots and beers. So I’m afraid I got a little despondent and gave up trying to interest them in the trendy drinks like you’re serving here. I took all the fancy stuff and locked it up in the storeroom. Didn’t want to keep lookin’ at it, as it reminded me of happier times.” He looked around the bar with a broad smile. “But now, Al, thanks to you, it looks like happy days are here again! You must be enjoyin’ yourself, too. Just look at that tip jar!” He pointed at a large beer pitcher behind the bar overflowing with silver coins and paper money. “And the night’s just begun.”

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Duckworth, I am greatly gratified. But I would be even more so if you would grant me a favor.”

“Sure, Al, anything you want, except time off, of course,” said BJ expansively. “What do you want? Raise your salary? Better clothes?” He winked at Al and nudged his shoulder. “Maybe a cute little barmaid or two to help serve the drinks, eh? So go ahead, ask away!” He leaned back comfortably and lit a cigar.

“Well, it’s really two things. First of all, your old regular bar customers and I have formed, er, sort of a club. We would very much appreciate it if we could meet here every afternoon from four to six. After which they depart. As you can see, with the new, young, hip crowd we have now, this isn’t really their scene any longer. And secondly, because it takes some time to prepare the bar for this particular kind of business, I would like to change the hours that The Last Resort is open to the public. Make it eight at night until two in the morning like a regular nightclub. In return, I promise to run the bar by myself. As I said before, Mr. Duckworth, you need not trouble

yourself. Come in and enjoy yourself. Or go somewhere else and enjoy yourself. Either way, rest assured that the bar is in good hands. And I think I can promise you a handsome profit. All I require is one night off a week and, to that end, I will hire and train a substitute bartender for that night. So, what do you say, Mr. Duckworth? Is it a bargain?" He tentatively offered BJ his hand.

BJ thought for a long moment, puffing on his cigar and sipping his drink at intervals. Finally he said, "Al, I must be crazy. I've known you what, two, three days now, and already I'm practically handing you the deed to the bar. But all right, if you can live up to your promises, whatever you want, consider it done. But, Al," He gave him a serious look. "Don't let me down like Fast Eddie did, okay? Because then I'd have to hunt you down and kill you."

"Fair enough," agreed Al.

They shook hands in a solemn, businesslike way.

"So," said BJ, stubbing out his cigar and indicating his empty glass, "if I'm to be just another customer, make me another drink. Same again."

"With pleasure, Mr. Duckworth," said Al politely.

He moved away from BJ and looked around the bar. The night was yet young, but the crowd of people standing and sitting at the bar, jammed into the booths, and clustered round the jukebox and pool table were whooping it up as if it were New Year's Eve in Times Square. Lawyers, having thrown off their jackets and loosened their neckties, were enthusiastically challenging each other to games of pool and darts. Corporate middle managers were eagerly attempting to seduce female members of their support staff, having brought them here to demonstrate their youth and hipness. From every corner of the crowded bar were the shouts of people enjoying themselves to the fullest and drinking glass after glass of the bar special as if there were to be no tomorrow.

As Al simultaneously served drinks and flirtatious banter to his customers, he noticed, to his surprise, that no one in the bar was having a better time than he was.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**A**t The Madhouse that same evening, Simona, Rick and Wanda had retired to Rick and Wanda's room a few hours after the house meeting and were now engaged in a serious discussion about their favorite topic of the last few days.

"So let me get this straight," Wanda was saying to Rick. "You know something about Al that we don't know. But for some weird reason you can't tell us? What did Al do, swear you to secrecy or something? Come on, Rick, we always tell each other everything."

"Oh, all right," Rick relented. He hesitated for several seconds before continuing. "But you've got to promise me not to tell anyone else, or let on to Al that you know his secret."

"All right, already!" Wanda and Simona exclaimed in unison. "So what's the big secret?"

"Well," said Rick, settling back comfortably on his bed, "you remember last night's rainstorm? Traffic on the Bay Bridge was moving so slow I couldn't get to The Last Resort in time to pick up Wanda. By the way, you're not still pissed at me, are you? It wasn't exactly my fault, you know."

Wanda said through clenched teeth, "No Rick, I'm not still pissed. But I'm sure gonna be if you don't get to the point. Now what about Al?"

"Okay, when I got to the bar, it was all locked up for the night. So I went around to the alley entrance, you know, to that little room in the back where Al sleeps. Well, the light was on, so I looked in through the little window and guess what I saw?"

"This is no time for guessing games," broke in Simona impatiently. She looked at Wanda. "We're both gonna take serious action here, if you don't get on with it!" They both glared at Rick menacingly.

"Okay, okay! Well, Al was sitting there with a young girl who looked like, you know, a street person. And she was screaming her head off. And then the weirdest thing happened!"

"What, what?" pleaded Simona, rocking back and forth on the bed.

"I dunno," said Rick sheepishly after a few seconds of silence. "Like, this is gonna sound way too weird, but I swear I heard this—this voice in my head. And it was saying, I don't know, something like, 'Come in and sit down!' and I couldn't do anything but what it told me to do. So I remember sitting on a box in the corner and then I must have missed some stuff because the next thing I knew, the girl was gone and Al was talking to me like I'd been there all the time and just nodded off or something. And that's when he told me."

"Told you what?" shrieked Wanda in exasperated fury. "I swear, Rick, it takes you longer to tell a story than the Wizard when he's tripping on acid!"

"He told me," replied Rick with dignity, ignoring her outburst, "that he had studied with the holy guys in Tibet and he was just helping this girl with her tension headaches. He told me not to tell anybody else 'cause he was embarrassed about being a spiritual dude in the 90's. Thought people would laugh at him or something."

"So that's the big secret we've been waiting for?" Wanda sounded disappointed.

Simona looked at Rick thoughtfully. "That could explain some things about Al, I guess. But do you think we should believe him, Rick? I mean, how do you know he isn't just giving you a story? You've got to admit, that's the kind of stuff you'd take to heart. Sure, we all like Al, especially some of us," she looked at Wanda who blushed but said nothing, "but can we really believe everything he says?"

The other two shook their heads doubtfully.

"I don't know, Simona," ventured Rick. "It seems like you're always suspicious of everybody."

Simona got up, looked out the window for a moment, and then snapped her fingers excitedly. "I've got an idea!" she cried. "I think I know a way to get some answers, one way or another! Remember, last night at the bar? We were with that stuck-up reporter and she showed us that article about a UFO in the Park? Well, I got to thinking. Didn't you guys tell me that you first saw Al wandering around naked at just about that exact time and place? So what do you say we all go out there right now and do a little investigating. I was thinking about it last night, but the damn rain got in the way."

“Sure, Simona,” said Rick with a puzzled look. “I’ll drive us out there right now. But what do you expect to find? It’s been two days and there’s been heavy rain. If there was any evidence, it’s probably been washed away by now.”

Wanda knit her brows in concentration. “Are you saying, Simona, that you think there’s some connection between Al and this UFO sighting? I’m not sure I like the way this is going.” She frowned and lowered her head.

Simona went over and put an arm around Wanda’s shoulders. “I don’t really know, Wanda,” she confessed, “but I’ve got a feeling. Remember when I had a feeling about that bike messenger you were in love with last year?”

“Boy, do I ever!” she made a gagging noise. “The creep turned out to be a strung-out junkie and couldn’t even get it up.”

“Well, I’ve got a feeling about Al, too. Not bad or anything,” she added hastily, “but some things about him just don’t add up. So humor me, will you?”

Wanda nodded her head. “I guess I can trust you, Simona.”

Simona turned to Rick. “Okay then. Let’s get this show on the road.” She looked at her watch. “It’s only about eight o’clock now. That means we can get out there, look around, and still make it back to The Last Resort in time to have a few drinks before closing and invite Al to dinner. Is that okay with you guys?”

“Sounds good to me,” said Rick. “I like the dude, even sort of love him, I think—no offense, Wanda—but I want to know the truth as much as anybody.”

“Well, what are we waiting for?” asked Wanda, suddenly impatient.

“That’s the spirit!” exclaimed Simona.

While Wanda went into the kitchen to pack a thermos of coffee and some sandwiches (“Be prepared!” Simona had cautioned), Rick went out and pulled the van up to the front door. So in about twenty minutes they were cruising up Fulton Street on the north side of the Park.

“Where did you say you first saw Al?” asked Simona, looking out the window at the street signs.

"I guess it was somewhere around that entrance at Eighth Avenue," replied Wanda. "Rick's van had broken down—again!—and we were parked on the south side of the street. Rick was working on the van and I was pacing up and down. It must have been near midnight—'cause I was sure we were gonna have to hitch downtown to make last call—when we saw this naked dude coming out of the bushes. Well, we both giggled and Rick gave him some clothes—but you know the rest, right? I just like talking about it," she sighed. "He's just sooo cute!"

"OK," said Simona, strictly business. "Rick, turn the van around and park as close as you can to where you were the other night."

Rick did as he was told. They were just about to get out of the van when Simona stopped them. "Wait a minute, you guys! What's going on over there?" She pointed to a man who was wandering aimlessly back and forth just inside the Park's entrance.

"I don't know," replied Rick. "Poor dude looks like he's in some kind of trouble."

The three of them got out of the van and walked toward the stranger who now appeared to be staggering from side to side like a drunkard. On closer inspection, he proved to be a youngish man with a trim, athletic build, clean-shaven, with slightly longish, sandy-colored hair. He was dressed in California casual style—Gap sweatshirt, Dockers and running shoes—but his clothes were torn and dirty, as if he'd been wearing them for days. Every now and then he looked into the interior of the park, covered his face with his hands, and moaned piteously.

Rick walked up to the stranger without hesitation. "You okay, mister, you need some help or something?" he asked gently and sympathetically.

The stranger looked at Rick, and then at Wanda and Simona, who had followed close behind. With a trembling voice he asked them, "Have any of you seen my little dog? She's a cute little toy poodle, pure white." He seemed to be in a state of shock.

Rick took him by the arm and gently led him over to the van, the others following. "No, we haven't seen your dog," replied Rick kindly, inspecting the stranger for any signs of injury. "But what are

you doing out here? Did you have an accident or something? When did you lose your dog, anyway?"

His eyes had a glazed look as if he didn't understand. But he let Rick put him in the back seat of the van and accepted a little of the coffee that Wanda poured for him. In a few minutes he began to react more normally.

"That's better," said Rick. "Now, please tell us what happened."

The man made a visible effort to pull himself together and began. "My name's Barry—Barry Mariano. I'm a theater costume designer. I was walking my little dog out by the side of the Park, like I always do. We live just a few blocks up from here, across the street, me and my little dog Zsa Zsa, in a cozy little apartment..." He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. When he had recovered somewhat, he continued. "So I was walking Zsa Zsa and we decided to go into the park. It was later than we usually go, but it was so warm out, I just had to give in when she brought me her little leash..." He sobbed again for a few seconds. "Anyway, we had only been in the park for a few minutes when we saw these incredibly bright lights up in the sky, kind of hovering, if you know what I mean. They looked like those searchlights you see at Hollywood premieres, you know? So I went toward the direction of the lights—toward a meadow—and they came down closer and closer until finally they were on the ground. I pulled Zsa Zsa behind a bush and tried to make her be quiet. But she started barking like she was terribly afraid of something and pulled the leash out of my hand and ran away."

"Poor guy," said Wanda sympathetically.

"Those lights—that must have been the UFO sighting. But that was two nights ago," said Simona in amazement. "And you've been wandering around here all this time?"

"No wonder you're in such bad shape," added Rick.

"I've been looking for Zsa Zsa," sighed Barry. "I guess I lost track of the time. I don't really remember anything between the time I lost her and I saw it—and when you guys found me. Has it really been two days?"

Simona ignored his question. "What do you mean, 'saw it'?" she demanded.

“Well, after Zsa Zsa ran off, I stood up and started calling after her, but she wouldn’t listen and soon she was out of sight. So I started to run after her and—then I saw something I’ll never forget! There were two glowing figures, all bathed in white light. They were standing in a sort of glowing green circle. And there were these voices...” He put his hands to his head as if to block out the sound. “It’s like they were in my head, sort of like coming from a Walkman. I couldn’t understand much of it, but somehow I knew that the voices were coming from the lit-up figures and it’s like there were two voices. Like one was talking to the other. It kept saying something like ‘replicate’! And then one of the figures started changing, becoming gradually more human in shape and at the same time I could feel—and this is the really scary part—like a sort of hand reaching into my mind and, like, pulling stuff out of it. And then this one figure was fully human and the other was just a light going back up into the sky. Then this human figure looked at me—I was still standing there in plain sight, too terrified to move—it looked at me and that’s when I really freaked out. It was—or seemed to be—a naked man. But that’s not the weirdest part. Get this—he looked exactly like my old lover, Alan—Alan Page—who died of AIDS over five years ago. This Alan thing looked at me and, I swear to God, it smiled at me! Then it walked toward the place where Zsa Zsa and I entered the Park. I guess I don’t remember anything after that.”

As Barry finished his story, the three companions looked at him and then at each other in amazement.

“Wow!” said Wanda finally. “I wouldn’t believe that if I saw it in the movies. What a great story!”

“I assure you,” said Barry, regaining some of his dignity, “every word of it happened just like I said. Either that or I’m totally insane. But you’re the only people I’ve told so far, and I feel better to have gotten it off my chest. What do you think, am I crazy or did it really happen?”

“I, for one, am inclined to believe you,” replied Simona gravely. “After all, something frightened your dog, didn’t it?”

“That’s right, Zsa Zsa! I’ve got to find Zsa Zsa,” cried Barry, looking distraught again. “She’s a house dog. She can’t survive in a wilderness like this!”

“Don’t worry, Barry, we all believe you!” Rick looked at Wanda, who nodded in agreement. “And we’ll help you find your dog, if we can.”

“But first,” said Simona, “lead us to the place where you saw those lights.”

Barry obliged. As the four explorers approached the meadow, they could just barely see a faintly glowing green ring about fifty yards in diameter circling the center of the meadow.

“I’m going to check this out,” said Simona boldly, starting toward the ring.

“Wait a minute,” cautioned Wanda. “What if it’s radioactive or something?”

“Good point,” agreed Simona, picking up a fallen tree branch. “I’ll stick this into the ring and see what happens.”

As she did so, she felt a strange tingling sensation, first in her hand, then in her arm, and finally spreading over her whole body. “Omigod!” she exclaimed, dropping the branch. Then before anyone could stop her, she plunged into the glowing green light and closed her eyes. A blissful look spread over her face, and she began to writhe in what looked very much like sexual ecstasy.

“Quick,” cried Rick, greatly alarmed by this turn of events. “Let’s get her out of there!”

Rick and Barry immediately grabbed her by the arms and pulled her out of the ring. “Come on,” Rick called out to Wanda, as he and Barry half carried the still-moaning Simona back to the van. “We’re going to The Last Resort,” he told Wanda grimly. “There’s only one dude who can make sense out of all this—and that’s Al!”

As they got into the van and started downtown, Wanda looked wistfully back toward the park. “Gee, Rick,” she said plaintively, “couldn’t you have given me just a few minutes alone with that ring?”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**A** I was busily serving drinks to the multitudes at The Last Resort when the four adventurers walked in. Simona had by this time completely recovered from her erotic experience

with the glowing green ring. "In fact," she had remarked to her companions on the way downtown, "it was just about the best sex I've ever had." The guys just looked at her anxiously and Wanda enviously, but nobody said anything.

As they entered and made their way to the bar through the boisterous crowd, they were in an apprehensive mood. They didn't know what to say to Al in light of recent developments, or what to expect from him. It was as if the camaraderie of the last few days had vanished, and Al was a stranger to them again.

Al, however, greeted them warmly as usual. "Rick, Wanda, Simona, how nice to see you all again! And who is that gentleman with you, Rick? I don't believe I've made his acquaintance."

Barry gaped at Al, his eyes wide in disbelief. "That's the guy!" he stammered to the group. "The alien—my dead lover, Alan—whoever or whatever he is! I...think I'm gonna be sick!" He slumped down on a bar stool.

Al glared at his three friends with a stony look which stopped them in their tracks. As they stood there in a daze, Al jumped quickly up onto the bar and announced in a loud voice. "Ladies and gentlemen! Thank you very much for your patronage and good spirits! As a reward, for the next fifteen minutes drinks for everyone are on the house. All you have to do is select someone among you to come behind the bar and serve the drinks!"

This announcement was greeted by general applause and shouts of approval. There was some discussion among the people close to the bar, but in a little over a minute several of them pushed a rather reluctant young man up to Al.

"Well," said Al. "It appears that you are the chosen one. What's your name?"

"Uh, I'm Kevin," replied the young man. "I've, uh, had a little bartending experience."

"Excellent!" beamed Al. "Come around behind the bar and get started. These people are getting thirsty. I'll be back in twenty minutes. By the way, I've locked the cash register, so don't be getting any ideas. You four!" he commanded. "Come with me!"

As he led his four silent and unprotesting charges toward his room at the back of the bar, Kevin was soon deluged with a flood of



people, all simultaneously demanding his immediate attention. "Give me a break!" he wailed. "I've only got two hands here."

Al ushered the four companions into the room and closed the door, which diminished the raucous roar of the bar customers to a faintly audible buzz.

"All right," he began in a brisk and authoritative voice. "Wanda and Simona, you sit on that cot. Rick on the crate. And you—what's your name?"

"Barry," answered that hapless individual in an expressionless voice.

"Barry," repeated Al. "You stand right here and look at me!"

They all obeyed Al's instructions in silent stupefaction.

"Now, Barry, since you're the cause of all this trouble, tell me what it is you want!"

"I want my little dog, Zsa Zsa, back," said Barry in a dull voice. "And I want to know if you're really Alan or an alien or what. And I want my life and my peace of mind back."

"That can be very easily done," replied Al, holding Barry's eyes with his own piercing stare. "If you will look at me carefully, you will see that I bear only a very superficial resemblance to your dead lover. And tonight is the first time you have seen me. You were upset when your dog ran away, and that is the cause of your overwrought state of mind. The rest you merely imagined. As for your dog, I fear we'll have to replace her. Or, I should say, replicate her."

As he said this, he rolled up the left sleeve of his shirt, exposing his arm to the elbow. Immediately his arm began to emit a golden glow, faintly at first, but then with dazzling brightness. Soon a bulge appeared at his elbow and swelled bigger and bigger until his arm looked like a glowing amoeba undergoing mitosis.

When the process was complete, his arm reassumed its normal shape and ceased to glow. But on the floor at his feet was what appeared to be a pure white toy poodle.

*What am I doing in this form?* said a voice inside Al's head. It came from the poodle.

*Listen carefully, Al thought in the same manner. Study this man's mind—he pointed to Barry—and learn what you are to be. Since you are uppermost in his thoughts, it shouldn't be difficult.*

The dog looked intently for a moment at Barry who, during this time had stood still as a statue. *I am his little dog, Zsa Zsa*, it said silently to Al. *I ran away from him but now I have returned. We love each other very much and I will never leave him and cause him pain again.*

And with that, Zsa Zsa II leaped into Barry's arms. He caught her automatically but continued to stare straight ahead uncomprehendingly.

"As for you other three," said Al aloud, turning his attention to Rick, Wanda and Simona, who had not moved since Al had ordered them to sit, "I don't want any bad feelings between me and my friends, and you are certainly my friends. So here is what happened." He looked intently at each of them in turn. "You went out to the Park to investigate the mystery surrounding me. This is allowed. In fact, I rather like it. It makes me feel special. But nonetheless, this is what you will remember. You went to the Park, you found Barry wandering up and down, looking for his dog. You three searched the area and finally you, Rick, found Zsa Zsa taking shelter under some bushes, where she had miraculously survived the rainstorm of the previous night. You reunited her with Barry and then you all decided to come down here to celebrate Barry's good fortune. In fact, all four of you are in an exceptionally happy, lighthearted and celebratory mood. You saw no glowing ring, nor did you hear Barry speak of his dead lover or radiant aliens. Do you all understand?"

They all nodded their heads dumbly.

Al looked at Barry's watch. "Well," he continued more cheerfully, "I see fifteen minutes have passed. Time to go and relieve Kevin. He must be going crazy by now."

He led the four friends back into the main part of the bar. As Al had predicted, Kevin had indeed worked himself into a frenzy trying to keep up with the constant flow of requests for free drinks.

Al pointed to a just-vacated booth in the back. "Please take a seat over there," he said, reassuming his polite bartender's manner once again, "and be so good as to give me your drink orders. First one is on the house," he added, "seeing as I'm in a good mood tonight."

“Oh, Al,” said Wanda, back to being her old self—as indeed were the other three as well. “You always put me in a good mood.”

“Why, thank you, Wanda,” he replied. “The feeling is mutual, I assure you. Now, what can I get you all?”

“Just beers all around, I guess,” said Rick. “And put them on my tab. Or do you want something stronger, Barry? After all, you’ve been through quite a lot.”

“I think,” said Barry, squeezing Zsa Zsa, who didn’t seem to mind a bit, a little tighter, “that on this happy occasion I will break down and have the strawberry daiquiri special. That was my lover, Alan’s, favorite drink, and I sometimes have one when I feel particularly nostalgic. Did I mention Alan to any of you?”

“No, I don’t think so,” said Simona. The others shook their heads.

“Well, then, that’s three beers and one strawberry daiquiri. Be back in a jiffy!”

As Al strode briskly away, Barry said lightly, “you know that bartender—Al?—looks a little like Alan. Maybe that’s what made me think of him tonight.”

“What happened to him?” asked Rick. “Did you guys break up or what?”

“No,” said Barry sadly. “I could never leave Alan. But he left me, poor sweet guy. Died of AIDS in ’85. And he was only thirty-two. Ah, well, the past is the past and I’m just happy to have my little dog back, safe and sound. Isn’t that right, Zsa Zsa!” Zsa Zsa gave a little yip of agreement and snuggled closer into Barry’s arms. “I can’t thank you enough,” he continued, “for helping me find her.”

“No problem,” replied Simona. “We just got lucky. And it’s certainly lucky that she’s in such good shape.”

“Sometimes we’re just blessed,” said Barry, raising his eyes toward the heavens.

As this religious observation was being made, Al was behind the bar unlocking the cash drawer. To the flustered Kevin he said, “Thanks, I’ll take it from here. By the way, what’s your favorite drink?”

“Uh, scotch, I guess,” he replied. He was sweating profusely and gasping for breath.

"Here, then, take this with my compliments." Al tossed him an unopened bottle of J&B. "Thanks for helping me out. Now, go tell everybody that the bar is open for cash business."

The bewildered Kevin walked slowly away from the bar, cradling the bottle of J&B in his arms as if it were his firstborn.

"Let's see," said Al to himself, "that was three beers and one tonight's special."

After Al had served his friends their drinks and returned to the bar, he happened to notice that BJ had entered the bar yet again. He walked up to the bar like a man in a deep depression and, in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, ordered a Jameson's on the rocks from Al. Then he sat down on an empty stool at the end of the bar and began nursing his drink with an air of weary sadness.

Al went over to him. "Mr. Duckworth," he began humbly. "I've been looking all over for you."

"I'm sorry, what's that again?" mumbled BJ, as if noticing his surroundings for the first time.

"Mr. Duckworth, I've been thinking about what I told you a little while ago." His voice took on a contrite tone. "I think I might have spoken too soon."

"Eh?" inquired BJ.

"You know, what I said earlier. I may have been a bit premature in telling you I could run the bar by myself. The sin of pride, you know. In fact," he continued, walking over toward the beer taps, "I've been having a little trouble with this line here." He bent down and began looking at it intently. "There seems to be too much foam in the beer."

BJ's face brightened as he quickly came around behind the bar to where Al was squatting.

"Hell," he said, "no big problem, just a simple adjustment to this valve here." He made a few slight turns of the valve and then drew a glass of beer. "Seems to be working fine now," he said, pride evident in his voice.

"You see, Mr. Duckworth, this is what I mean," Al replied gratefully. "I don't know how to do everything yet. I don't have the experience. So, if maybe you could come in every other night or so

and help me out for about an hour, you could teach me the finer points of the business and advise me if things go wrong.”

“Al,” BJ grinned, “you got a deal! In fact, why don’t I work for about an hour now and help you out?” He looked at the crowd of people who were waving money and empty glasses at them. “I’ll do the beers and the simple drinks, and you do the fancy mixed ones—you seem to have a flair for that.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Duckworth,” said Al politely as he began to blend daiquiris and margaritas.

About an hour later, Barry, who was working on his third strawberry daiquiri, was becoming slightly tipsy. “Ohh!” he groaned, putting his hands on his head. “I think I’m beginning to feel the effects of my anxiety about Zsa Zsa.” He tried to get to his feet, almost falling on the table in the process.

“I think Barry’s about had it,” Wanda whispered to Rick. “Be a good boy and drive him home.”

“What!” replied Rick in a loud whisper. “And leave you girls here all alone?”

“Go on,” Wanda hissed. “We’ll be fine and you can be back before midnight. There’s plenty of time yet before last call.” Simona nodded at this.

“Okay, okay,” Rick grudgingly agreed. Then in a louder voice he said to Barry, “come on, man, I think you could use a little sleep. I’ve got my van parked right outside. I’ll drive you home. Where did you say you lived again?”

“Oh, fank you, fank you!” Barry embraced Rick drunkenly, almost pulling them both onto the seat beside Simona. “I live at Fulston and Funton. I mean Funtan and Fulsome.”

“Don’t worry,” said Rick, gently disengaging himself from a now-amorous Barry. “I know where that is. Fulton and Funston.” He led Barry toward the door, Zsa Zsa following at their heels.

“You’re the nishest guy I ever met,” Barry mumbled. “Take me home and do with me what you will.” He made a grandiose gesture with his arm, knocking two pint glasses off the bar as he did so.

As they shattered on the floor, Rick muttered, “Good thing they were empty. I better get this guy out of here. Come on, Barry,” he

said in a louder voice, "time to sleep it off." Then he led the unprotesting Barry out the door.

Simona, who had been watching this scene with Wanda and practically everyone else in the bar, said, "Good, now that the guys are finally gone, we can have a little girl talk."

"Yes," agreed Wanda dreamily. She was watching Al mix and serve drinks to the demanding crowd. His shirtsleeves were rolled up past his elbows and his muscular forearms commanded her attention. "Isn't he just the cutest thing," she sighed.

"Who, Al? Yeah, he's a real hunk, all right. But speaking of cute things, take a look over there by the jukebox."

Wanda looked and gasped, her face turning pale. "Oh, no!" she cried out. "Tell me it's not Crazy George. I just know if he sees me he's gonna hit on me again!" She ducked down and put her head on the table and covered it with her arms.

But it was too late. It was indeed Crazy George who now began walking over toward the booth where Simona and Wanda were sitting (or crouching now). He was dressed in the same biker's outfit he had worn at their last encounter, but there was something different about him. A more tentative walk had replaced his customary swagger, and he approached their booth in a humble manner.

"Uh, Ms. Wanda," he tapped her gently on the shoulder. "Um, I just, you know, wanted to apologize for the other night. I been thinkin' it over, that an' what Al said an' all. I guess maybe I had one too many beers or somethin'."

As he touched her she looked up, first in alarm and then relaxing as she began to understand what he was saying. By the time he had finished, she was smiling.

"It's okay, George," she told him. "No hard feelings. Apology accepted."

"It's just that I get kind of lonesome," George persisted. "Let me buy you a beer and maybe have one dance with you. I promise I'll behave myself."

"Well, maybe," replied Wanda. "But I get to pick the song. Give me a quarter." She led George over to the jukebox and soon they were dancing to the classic strains of "The Last Time" by the Stones.

"That Wanda," marveled Simona. "How does she do it?" As she watched Wanda and George dance, she noticed a tall man with thinning blonde hair standing just inside the entrance and looking around anxiously.

"Tim!" yelled Simona over the crowd. "Over here—in the back!"

Tim's face brightened and he quickly made his way over to her booth and slid in beside her.

"Hi, Simona," he said. "I was hoping I'd find you here. I dropped by The Madhouse looking for you and Marty said he thought you were all coming down here. I finished my lighting plot, and I just wanted to apologize for upsetting you last night. I guess I was a little hard on Al. I don't really know the guy, but I hate the type that just moves in and takes over, know what I mean?"

"Sure, Tim, apology accepted." She shook her finger at him. "Just don't do it again! Al's different somehow," she continued thoughtfully. "You'd see that if you'd just get to know him a little."

"Yeah, I suppose so. But look at this place," he said, looking around. "Is it my imagination, or have the customers here finally gotten a little class? They sure dress better than the burned-out hippies and winos I usually see when I come in here. Look at that! Half of these guys are wearing suits and ties!" He stood up abruptly. "What are you drinking, Simona? I'll get us a couple."

"Well, I was drinking beer, but if you're buying, I'll have a Campari and soda."

"Sure thing, I'll be right back." As he started toward the bar, Wanda, flushed from dancing, returned to the booth and sat down beside Simona. "Say, didn't I just see Tim?" she asked.

"Yeah," replied Simona, "and just last week he was telling me he wouldn't be caught dead in a dive like this. Now he's in love with it just because some dorks wearing three-piece suits hang out here. So, how was Crazy George? You guys ready to tie the knot yet?"

Wanda ignored her sarcasm. "Oh, he's really changed. He's acting nice for a change and he's almost good-looking when he's not trying to be so macho. I'd almost go out with him now."

"Wanda!" exclaimed Simona in exasperation. "Sometimes I think you'd jump at anything with balls!"

"I said almost!" laughed Wanda, "but you can't blame a girl for keeping her options open. Oh, look!" she exclaimed, pointing to a tall, red-haired woman standing over by the bar. "Isn't she that newspaperwoman who was here last night?"

"Yeah, you're right! Stuck-up bitch! Don't get her attention or she'll come over here and bore us all night with her 'The Bay Area is my backyard' shit!"

It was indeed Phyllis Dean standing at the bar, but boring Simona and Wanda was the last thing on her mind. She was busy telling Al about her big scoop. Al was reading a copy of the hot-off-the-press Bay Weekly. Of particular interest to both of them was the front-page story, luridly entitled "My Night of Terror With the Devil Cult". It bore the modest byline: "By Phyllis Dean, Chief Investigative Reporter".

Al was saying, "But what a marvelous story. And this is all true? I think my favorite part is where you compel one of the cult members to unchain you from the tree in return for sexual favors."

"Yeah," said Phyl proudly. "I was in a spot that called for courage and quick thinking. And you know how these cult guys are. So horny they'll do anything to get laid. So this guy unchained me and I took off running and never looked back."

"Another thing that interests me," continued Al casually, "is this mention of some sort of glowing ring. Did you ever get close enough to find out what it was?"

"No, I just figured it was part of their ritual. You know, like the bonfire."

"Yes," he looked relieved. "That must be it. Well, I must congratulate you on escaping from a most harrowing situation and getting quite a story out of it, at that."

"Thanks," she replied warmly. "By the way, I'm meeting my publisher here. When he saw how well this issue was selling, he offered to take me out for a drink to celebrate, so naturally I invited him down here." She gave Al a little pat on the hand. "I guess there's a first time for everything. And just this morning he was yelling at me over the phone! Well, that's how these high-pressure business types are, I guess. Maybe you've met my boss? Blair Brockman, he's published the Weekly for over twenty years now. Still thinks he's a



young radical when he's really just an old fart!" She lowered her voice and said confidentially, "he has the weirdest vendetta against PG&E, of all things!"

"PG and what?" replied Al, puzzled.

"Oh, I forgot, you're new around here. Pacific Gas and Electric, our power utility. I can't imagine what he's got against them, but it must be personal."

"I don't believe I've met your Mr. Brockman. But then, like you say, I'm new around here."

"Oh, there he is!" exclaimed Phyl, waving vigorously at a striking figure just entering the bar. He was wearing faded blue jeans and a sweatshirt bearing the proud insignia of the New College Journalism Department. Thrown over this casual attire was a Sam Spade-style trench coat. He was a large man with a full but neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and short bristly hair to match.

He waved back and called out to Phyl in a deep, commanding voice. "Ah, Ms. Dean, there you are!"

"Mr. Brockman," said Phyl when he had joined them at the bar. "I'd like you to meet Al, the new bartender here. He's certainly made this a happening place almost overnight."

"Al, eh?" queried Brockman, looking him up and down. "Ever been in LA? You look like a guy I knew that used to pal around with Rock Hudson in the old days." He inspected Al more closely. "No, I guess not." He stroked his beard thoughtfully. "This guy would have to be a lot older now. Anyway," he looked around the bar at the throng of revelers, "you've really done wonders with this place. It used to be such a seedy little dive. What did you do, buy the other guy out?"

"Something like that," murmured Al.

"Well, keep up the good work!" he said jovially. "God knows this part of town could use a good high-toned night club like this." He turned to Phyl. "Ms. Dean, why don't you write a little lifestyle story about this place for next week's issue?"

"Mr. Brockman, sir!" she said, grinning with clenched teeth. "I'm the investigative reporter, remember?"

"Ah, yes," he said distractedly. "That's right. Well, we'll put that new girl on it, what's her name, Bimbo?"

“That’s Bambi, sir!”

“Ah, very well. Look, I think I see a booth opening up in the back. Oh, bartender, how about bringing us over a couple of your specials, what are they, strawberry daiquiris?”

“Right away, sir,” replied Al as Brockman and Phyl began to make their way through the crowd toward the booth.

Just then Rick came through the door and quickly rejoined Wanda and Simona. “Boy, is that guy kinky!” he exclaimed as he sat down beside them.

“How so?” inquired Simona with professional amusement.

“He wanted me to strip naked and whip him to the accompaniment of an old recording of ‘The Teddy Bears’ Picnic’.”

“That is kinky!” agreed Simona and Wanda, looking at each other in sympathy.

“You’re telling me!” said Rick. “Luckily he passed out before he could put the record on.”

“Was that before or after you stripped naked?” asked Wanda with a bored expression.

“Before, of course! You don’t think I’m that weird, do you?”

“It had occurred to me,” replied Wanda succinctly.

“Tim, over here!” yelled Simona, suddenly standing up and waving her arms. “Where the hell have you been for the last half hour?” she complained as he brought the drinks back to the booth.

“Sorry, honey,” he apologized, sliding into the booth beside her, “but I wanted to talk to some colleagues. You see those guys over there in the corner?” Simona nodded. “Well, the guy on the left knows Sam Shepard personally!”

“Well, la-di-da!” exclaimed Simona, patting him affectionately on the head. “Tell me all about it. Tomorrow.”

As the evening progressed, the talk became witty and wittier, the crowd drunk and drunker, and the young singles amorous and amorouser. By the time 1:45 rolled around, it seemed like Mardi Gras or Oktoberfest.

Al jumped up on the bar and rang the gong smartly with the felt hammer. A hush fell over the crowd. “Now that I’ve got your attention,” he said in a loud voice, “it’s time for CWI—the Cry of the

Wounded Innkeeper—you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here!"

"Oh my God," cried Wanda, "that time already? We completely forgot to ask Al to dinner."

"There's still time," said Simona. "We'll go ask him now. Rick, watch our stuff!"

"Yes, milady," replied Rick with mock servility.

Wanda and Simona strode toward the bar. Al was busy washing glasses and throwing away empty bottles.

"Al..." began Wanda tentatively.

He turned and looked at her. "Yes, Wanda, what can I do for you? I'm afraid the bar is closed for the night."

"No, that's not it. Umm..."

"What Wanda is trying to say," said Simona, coming to her rescue, "is that we want to invite you to dinner at our place. The Madhouse. So you can see where we live and meet our friends. Maybe make some new ones yourself."

"Yes," said Al at once. "I think I'd like that. Thank you very much." A look of dismay crossed his face. "But when? I'm just starting out here at the bar. I can't expect Mr. Duckworth to give me a night off after just a few days. I'm going to need some time to hire a relief bartender and train the person."

"This would be totally whenever you can make it, Al," said Wanda, recovering her voice. "Marty said any time is okay with him."

"Well," said Al thoughtfully, "Mr. Duckworth says that Monday is usually the slowest night of the week. So how about, uh, two weeks from Monday?"

"Sure, Al," agreed Simona, mentally checking the calendar. "That would be on the nineteenth. So, it's a date? About eight o'clock or so?"

"Eight it is," Al replied. "And thank you, ladies, for thinking of me. After all, I'm a stranger in town."

"Don't mention it," said Wanda, gazing at Al fondly.

They went back to the booth, collected Rick, and went outside. They were the last to leave.

When they had left, Al stood for a moment silently, hands on hips, surveying the wreckage. "Well," he said to himself. "I think

things went rather well tonight after a rather rough beginning. Now to clean up this place.”

When he had finished it was nearly three. As he entered his little room in the back, he heard a loud banging on his window.

With some irritation he opened the door to the alley and looked out. He was astonished to see Marjorie and a large crowd of shabbily-dressed men and women, all crowding around the back entrance to The Last Resort.

“Hi, Al,” grinned Marjorie, entering as he held the door open for her. As soon as she stepped inside, he quickly shut the door to discourage any further invasion.

“Marjorie!” he exclaimed in amazement. “What are all these people doing here at this time of night?”

“They’re your customers,” she replied calmly, rolling and lighting a cigarette. “Remember our deal. Between three and five in the morning you agreed to help the people who can’t get help elsewhere.”

“But there must be fifty or sixty of them out there,” he protested. “How can I possibly see to all of them in only two hours?”

“Good point,” she agreed. “Well, how many of them do you think you can do?”

Al thought for a moment. “Let’s see,” he said, making some quick calculations, “Maybe ten minutes for each...that’s six an hour, which makes twelve a night. And that’s my final offer!”

She grinned at him again and puffed on her cigarette contentedly. “Okay, twelve it will be.” She motioned at Al to stay put and went back out the door. From inside he could hear her saying in a commanding voice, “All right, you people, form a straight line starting at this door and stretching down toward the end of the alley. And no shoving the cripples out of the way, neither! When everybody is in position, start counting off from the head of the line. One through twelve get to see him tonight. Thirteen through twenty-four, tomorrow night. Twenty-five through thirty-six the night after, and so on. And no cheating! Any disagreements or duplication of numbers and you both go to the back of the line. Anybody got a problem with that?”

The crowd murmured a grudging acceptance and then there was a prolonged shuffling of feet. Eventually, a more-or-less straight line was formed.

“Now, count off!” bellowed Marjorie.

“One, two, three...” the line began, each succeeding number sounding fainter and fainter. Presently a large number of people tramped away, muttering their disappointment. Marjorie rejoined Al inside his room as he prepared to face the twelve who remained.

She threw open the door once more. “Come in and introduce yourself to Al,” she told the lucky number one.

A largish man dressed in a greasy overcoat and worn-out running shoes entered the room, coughed alarmingly two or three times, and then spoke up hesitantly. “My name is Bob,” he said in a harsh whisper, “and I think I’ve got lung cancer.”

“Sit down over there, Bob,” sighed Al, “and we’ll see what we can do.”

He shuddered. It was going to be a long night.

And it was only his third night on earth.

## **PART TWO**

### **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

**O**n the Monday morning following Al’s arrival, an unprecedented conference was taking place at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory facility in the Berkeley Hills overlooking the campus of the University of California. Some fifteen or twenty people were crowded around a long table in one of the lab’s conference rooms. There was a general buzz of excited conversation, which quickly hushed when the door suddenly opened and a tall gray-haired, bespectacled man entered, flanked by two beefy security guards in full weapons gear.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, sitting down at the head of the table and spreading several pages of notes in front of him. “A good morning to you all. I am Dr. Whitman, head of the research facility at Lawrence Livermore. I thank you all for coming to this conference on such short notice, and I apologize for any

inconvenience our extraordinary security measures may have caused you. This, as you may have guessed, is a closed conference. No members of the press have been invited to, or even notified of, this meeting. You all should have been searched before entering this room, and if any electronic recording devices, audio or visual, have been confiscated from you, they will be returned to you upon your departure. This meeting is, however, being recorded by the facility, and the resulting record will be the sole property of this facility due to the extremely confidential nature of this conference. Furthermore," he looked up from his notes and spoke directly to the invitees, "no one will be allowed to enter or to leave this room once the meeting has begun. Now, are there any questions before we proceed to the business at hand?"

The attendees cast questioning glances at each other but remained silent.

"Very well," Dr. Whitman continued. "Each of you has been given a lapel tag on which is printed your name, professional credentials, and position in your various departments. Since most of you do not know each other, if you wish to speak, please stand up, and when recognized state the information on your lapel tag before continuing, so that everyone may know who you are.

"All right, then, to business. This meeting is now in session. The first item on the agenda is to inform you all of a device recently invented and tested by one of the scientists here at the University. Ladies and gentlemen, I direct your attention to the foot of the table."

As he did so, a small elderly man in a rather severely tailored black suit, plain white dress shirt, and narrow black necktie stood up.

"Allow me to introduce to you all the respected Chairman of the Theoretical Physics Department of the University of California, Dr. Dieter Auslander."

As Dr. Auslander picked up his notes from the table, the harsh conference room lights reflected off his completely shaved head. He then began to read from these notes in a thick German accent:

"Ladies and gentlemen, you all know of the common device called the electroencephalogram, or EEG. It measures human brain waves and gives neurologists and psychologists an insight into the actual workings of the human mind. But what most people do not realize,

and what I have been able to discover and prove after many long years of study and research, is simply this.” He rearranged his notes and looked at the attendees for the first time, speaking slowly and carefully as if ordering his thoughts at the same time. “There is a distinct pattern which is common to all human brain waves. Years ago, I discovered how to identify this pattern. But for quite some time I could think of no practical application for this discovery. Then last summer, purely by chance, I was attending a physicist’s convention in Chicago at the same time that the annual conference of SETI was being held there. In fact, there are two members of SETI here today.” He pointed at a man and a woman sitting on his right halfway down the table.

“Some of you may not be aware,” he continued, reading from his notes again, “of the SETI project or its purpose. The word ‘SETI’ itself is an acronym for ‘Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence’. After the closing of my convention, I had the opportunity to talk to some of the SETI delegates. It was an extremely enlightening session. Over and over, they expressed their need for some sort of device to discover and locate intelligent extraterrestrials, something much more direct and effective than monitoring for radio waves or other similar techniques. I thought immediately of my brain wave device. If intelligent alien life forms exist, I reasoned to myself, they may well have brains similar to ours. Similar and yet different. Within a few months I had altered my brain wave device to include a feature much like that of a primitive Geiger counter. A Geiger counter, as you all know, emits loud clicks when it is brought into the vicinity of radioactive material. My device theoretically does the same when in the proximity of brain waves which are not human in origin. What proximity, you may ask. My device now has a range of about thirty light years. And I am constantly working to find a way to boost its power.”

Professor Auslander had presented all of the preceding as if he were giving a routine lecture to first-year physics students. Now, however, he paused, rubbed his bald head, and returned his notes to the table in front of him.

“I mentioned the word ‘theoretically’,” he said dramatically, looking directly at his audience. “But within the last few days

something so astonishing has happened that I have spent the last twenty-four hours without sleep, attempting to verify my data.”

He paused again, coughed slightly, and poured a glass of water from a pitcher on the conference table. After taking a few swallows he continued. “A few weeks ago, at my request, my device was installed in the huge observatory dome here at the research facility. It was mounted on a motorized crane which was programmed to sweep the skies in an arc from horizon to horizon every twenty-four hours. Theoretically it is able to search the skies for the presence of brain waves to a distance of thirty light years in any direction. A few nights ago, ladies and gentlemen,” he paused suspensefully and looked slowly around the room, “the first clicks were heard. They have continued for the entire weekend and are continuing as we speak.”

At this revelation there was a buzz of excitement and confusion throughout the room as several members jumped to their feet demanding permission to speak. Dr. Whitman recognized the young woman that Dr. Auslander had identified as being a member of SETI.

“Thank you, Dr. Whitman,” she began in a low melodious voice. “I am Dr. Singh, Vice Chairperson of Research at SETI. Dr. Auslander, can this be true? Have we really, after so many fruitless years of searching, definitive proof of the existence of extraterrestrials in some part of the immediate galaxy? And if so, where?” She sat down and waited attentively for his reply.

“Yes, and no,” Dr. Auslander replied slowly. “When the clicks began, our questions were the same as yours. Where was the data coming from? Where were the ET’s located? Only when we began checking the data did we discover how grave the technician’s error had been! The directional signal on the device had somehow been calibrated incorrectly by the incredible amount of 180 degrees. In simple terms, all these weeks when we thought we had been monitoring the heavens, we had in fact been monitoring the earth. And not the whole earth, either. Due to the placement of the device, the clicks must be emanating from a relatively small area. Ladies and gentlemen,” he said in a louder voice as the excitement in the room was now very audible. He turned to the wall behind him and



pulled down a large map of the State of California and then picked up a pointer.

“After painstakingly calculating the mathematical data, I would stake my reputation on the fact that somewhere between Santa Rosa on the north, Sacramento on the east, San Jose on the south, and of course San Francisco on the west, one or more extraterrestrial beings are to be found!”

After Dr. Auslander’s dramatic revelation, the conference at the Lawrence Livermore Research facility quickly degenerated into chaos. The attendees were arguing among themselves at the top of their lungs without any regard for orderly decorum. Dr. Auslander had sat back down silently in his chair at the foot of the long conference table and was watching the effects of his speech with equal parts amusement and dismay. Dr. Whitman, the conference facilitator, was standing at the head of the table, helplessly watching the confusion and disorder. He wished he had brought his gavel.

Reluctantly, he gestured to the beefy security guard on his right, who nodded and unholstered his 45-caliber automatic. He pointed the weapon at the ceiling and fired three quick rounds. The noise was deafening.

“Don’t worry,” said Dr. Whitman, now clearly audible in the stunned silence that ensued. “Those were just blanks. But now that I have your attention, let me remind you that this is a top-level security conference, not a Friday night football rally in the Bear’s Lair. We will have order. Anyone having any comments or questions for Dr. Auslander will raise his or her hand and follow proper procedure. No one is to speak until recognized by the chair. That’s better,” he said as a half-dozen people silently raised their hands. “You, sir.”

He pointed to a large, solidly built man with a steel gray buzz cut. He wore an army dress uniform with four stars on each epaulet and what must have been several pounds of combat ribbons and medals. “General George Armstrong, Joint Chiefs of Staff!” he barked out with military precision. “Dr. Assleander, are you trying to tell us that there’s space aliens running around loose in the Bay Area?”

“My name is Auslander, sir!” the doctor replied stiffly. “And yes, as I have indicated, my device reveals some sort of non-human

intelligence somewhere within the area I just designated on the map.”

“Whatever,” said the general in a deprecating manner. “But how do we know this device of yours works? And how do we know what we’re looking for? Little green men or monsters or what?”

Dr. Whitman replied, “As to your first point, General, as there were obviously no alien intelligences on which to test Dr. Auslander’s device, it remains in the theoretical stage. But considering the doctor’s experience and reputation, sir, we at the facility feel that we must not fail to fully investigate this possible threat to our national security. As for your second question...” He pointed to a youngish black woman in a severely tailored dark suit sitting far down on the left side of the table. “Let me introduce to you all Dr. Shambala Johnson, Assistant Chairperson of the UC Berkeley Biology Department. Dr. Johnson is a specialist in the field of exobiology. Dr. Johnson.” Dr. Whitman sat down as Dr. Johnson stood up.

“Thank you, Dr. Whitman,” she began in a clipped precise manner with just a touch of a southern accent remaining. “We here at the University have long been studying the theoretical physical forms that an extraterrestrial being here on earth might take. Let me refer you to the file folders marked Confidential in front of each of you. You may open them now.”

Each of the conference participants obediently did as they were told. Inside the folders were a dozen or more artists’ conceptions of the various physical forms an alien might take. Some were wildly monstrous, others much more handsome looking than humans, but all were decidedly and recognizably alien. The attendees dutifully studied each and every picture for about ten minutes. Then Dr. Johnson spoke again.

“Unfortunately, ladies and gentlemen, these theoretical constructs, produced after years of the most extensive research and attention to detail, may not be of much help in our present situation.”

They all looked at her questioningly, then back to the folders marked Confidential. Almost in unison, they sadly closed their folders and looked back at Dr. Johnson.

She continued. “We know, from Dr. Auslander’s report and the tracking records of his device, that the first signs of extraterrestrial

intelligence or intelligences was or were discovered at least three days ago. Yet there has been no public outcry, no rash of alien sightings. This leads us to believe that the physical form of the alien or aliens must be one of three types.” She held up one finger. “First, they might, at a casual glance, resemble some inanimate or non-intelligent object such as a rock or a tree. As the aliens are obviously highly technological and mobile (since they were able to travel all the way to this planet), this first possibility is not very likely.” She raised her second finger. “Second, they might naturally have, or at least be able to assume in some way, the appearance of a lower animal of some kind common to us—a cat, a dog, or even a rat. This is a more distinct possibility, but still, in our opinion, not very likely. Third,” she raised finger number three with a flourish, “and most likely, considering all the evidence, our alien or aliens must naturally have, or be able to assume, the form of a human being, or at least be able to appear human at a casual glance, perhaps with the addition of a little superficial makeup.”

A nondescript man in a San Francisco Police Department uniform raised his hand. When he was recognized, he stood up and said, “I’m Jordan Franklin, Chief, SFPD. My department is particularly concerned in this matter because of a small article in last Friday’s Clarion. He produced from his briefcase copies of the article, headlined “UFO’s in San Francisco?”, and passed them around the table. Each attendee took one and dutifully read the article. When they had all finished, Chief Franklin continued. “Since this is the only mention of any unusual activity of this kind within the specified area and time frame, we at the Department feel that San Francisco itself is the most logical place to begin this search.” He sat down to murmurs of agreement and polite applause.

Another man, bald-headed and bespectacled, quickly raised his hand. “Assistant FBI Director Jack Tanner, West Coast Region. Dr. Johnson, if this alien has all the outward characteristics of a human being, how can we possibly even begin to search for it among the millions of inhabitants of just the greater San Francisco Bay Area? What have we got to go on?”

“Allow me to answer that question, if you would,” said Dr. Auslander, standing up quickly. “My colleagues and I are working on

a way to reduce the size of my device to something that can be held in one's hand. We had not previously thought along these lines, because we could not foresee a need to do so. But my engineers inform me that it can be easily done, with very little reduction in reliability. One would only need to point the hand-held device in the desired direction and the existence of an alien intelligence will be verified by the glow of a colored light on the device. My engineers believe that the range of this device could be as much as twenty to thirty meters. We hope to have a prototype in a few days, and as many as six such portable devices within the week."

"Thank you, Dr. Auslander," replied Tanner. He then addressed the conference in general. "As the highest ranking FBI official in this area, I have full authority to head this operation, which I have code-named 'Project X'. I will coordinate the efforts of the various local law enforcement agencies. Dr. Auslander, I ask you to please report your progress on producing these hand-held devices to me daily. As soon as you are assured of their reliability, you will have them delivered to my headquarters at the San Francisco Federal Building by heavily armed guards under the tightest security. I will then oversee the distribution of these devices to the various local law enforcement agencies as I see fit."

Dr. Auslander agreed and Dr. Whitman stood up again. "Ladies and gentlemen," he concluded. "I think we have sufficiently discussed the matter at hand and reached a viable method by which to proceed to the solution of this matter. I thank all of you for your attendance at this meeting and remind you that anything discussed here today involves the highest level of national security and is not to be divulged by anyone. To do so would constitute a felonious and traitorous breach of our national security and would be dealt with severely. This session is now officially adjourned."

As the other attendees filed out, Assistant FBI Director Jack Tanner lingered for a moment. He wiped his bald head, which was sweating profusely, with a handkerchief, and gratefully downed a glass of water. The full import of his task was beginning to dawn on him.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**A**fter his eventful first three days, life on earth for Al became more or less routine. Afternoons from four to six would find him presiding over his Attitude Adjustment Hour Club, which seemed to be gaining members at an alarming rate. Louie, Shorty and the rest of the original group were now hard-working, or at least sober, citizens, who felt compelled to tell their old drinking buddies about Al and their new start in life. The effect was that in less than two weeks the original group of seven had grown to about fifty or more, causing Al to resort to granting admittance to the new members of the club by invitation only.

At 6:00 he would close The Last Resort for the usual two hours and spend the time in transforming it into the trendy nightclub so well loved by the fashionable frequenters of the hip SOMA scene. As the bar inevitably prospered, he began to make changes and additions to the basic bar menu. He bought cases of decent red and white wines at wholesale cost and sold them by the glass at vintage prices to his discerning customers.

One night after Al had been working at the bar for about a week, Rick dropped in for his usual couple of beers. Al led him around to the back corner of the bar and proudly showed him six gleaming new beer taps which had been installed that same day.

“Look, Rick,” he said, pointing out each tap in turn. “We now feature Guinness, Bass, Harp, Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, Red Hook ESB, and last but not least, your favorite—Full Sail Amber!”

Rick looked at the taps in astonishment. “Far out, Al!” he exclaimed. “But I don’t know if I can afford it,” he sighed. “I always get the Bud pints for one seventy-five. These must run about three bucks each.”

Al put his hand on Rick’s shoulder. “You were my first friend in San Francisco,” he reflected. “You gave me your clothes and got me this job and a place to live. So, for you it’s always Happy Hour—one seventy-five for any pint in the bar.”

"All riiight!" Rick was impressed. "What are you waiting for?" He dug two crumpled dollar bills out of his jeans. "A pint of the Full Sail Amber, if you please, bartender!"

"Coming right up, sir." He placed the pint on the bar in front of Rick and then whispered to him confidentially, "I've been looking at your bar tab. Rather sizeable, wouldn't you say?"

Rick blushed and stared down at the bar. "That's between me and BJ," he said defensively.

"But don't you think it would improve your relationship with him if you were to pay it off?" Al persisted.

"Yeah, but how?" asked Rick, spreading his hands out in a gesture of hopelessness. "You saw the figures." He took a swallow of his beer and licked his lips with pleasure. "Look, Al, there's only two ways a guy like me can make any money without dealin' or slavin' for the man. One is the small check I get every month." It was his turn to whisper to Al confidentially. "I tell Wanda and everybody it's an unemployment check, but really it's, well, it's sort of my allowance." There was an embarrassed silence.

"Go on," prompted Al. "But I'm not sure I understand this concept of 'allowance'."

"It's from my family back in Iowa," Rick replied, still whispering. "They're rich, and I guess they're sort of ashamed of me, 'cause I've never 'amounted to anything'. So they send me money and I promise to stay out here which is what I want to do anyway. I try to take as little as possible from them, just enough to pay Marty some rent once in a while and to support me and Wanda so we don't starve to death."

"I see," said Al thoughtfully. "But if they can afford it, I don't understand why this is a problem for you. You say they are 'ashamed' of you. Is this because you are not rich or successful?"

"Yeah, I suppose so, in a way," Rick replied honestly. "But it's more complicated than that."

"Then let me ask you this. Would they be any less ashamed of you if they didn't send you money?"

"Hmm," Rick drank some more beer and thought it over. "I dunno. Maybe."

Al didn't pursue this line of questioning. Instead he asked, "You mentioned a second way that you can make money. May I inquire what it is?"

"Well, everybody says I'm a pretty good sculptor. I'm working on a deal right now with some guy in Walnut Creek. He already bought one of my pieces that I never thought I'd sell and now we're talking about maybe another half-dozen. We're still negotiating on the fee."

Al thought in silence for a moment. Then he went over to the tap, drew another pint of Full Sail, and set it in front of Rick. "Don't worry," Al told him. "This one's on the house. So you're a pretty good sculptor, are you? Do you like doing it?"

"Sure, I guess so," he shrugged. "But it's a whole lot more fun when I'm getting paid for it. And without a high-powered reputation, I'm competing with a whole lot of people out there. So opportunities like this guy in Walnut Creek don't come along every day. Most of my stuff I just sell for a few bucks, beer money, whatever."

"I just might have an idea," said Al, leaning over to whisper to Rick yet again. "I know you like to do your abstract avant-garde pieces, but tell me—can you do natural-looking busts of ordinary people in ordinary plaster?"

"Sure," Rick shrugged again. "That's the easiest thing there is. Hell, I could do it from a bad Polaroid. But there's no call for that sort of thing these days."

"How much," asked Al, still whispering, "would it cost you to make such a bust?"

"Oh, I dunno, maybe only twenty-five dollars, maybe as much as fifty. But what are you getting at, Al?" Rick frowned, suddenly suspicious. "And what's all this got to do with my bar tab?"

"Trust me," Al replied with great sincerity. He resumed his normal voice and began carefully polishing the bar. "I think I know the answer to your little problem. Come back tomorrow night about nine o'clock. Oh, and wear your best 'artistic' clothes. We're going to have some fun."

"Hey, thanks man," Rick finished his beer and scratched his head. "But I don't know for what..."

Al came out from behind the bar and put his arm around Rick's shoulder in a fatherly manner. "Don't worry about it, Rick. Just show up and I'll do the rest."

Then he watched as Rick walked out of The Last Resort with a very puzzled look on his face.

The rest of Al's days were just as routine. At two in the morning he would close the bar, clean it and repair or replace the damage (for even young fashionable customers could be rowdy at times). At three he would go back to his little room in the rear of The Last Resort and take a deep breath, fling open the door that faced the alley—the domain of Marjorie, "Queen Mab", and her army of street people. There would always be more of the sick and wounded than he could handle, but he pressed on night after night, seeing and helping as many as he could.

One early morning at about five o'clock, just as he was showing the last person out the door, he looked over at Marjorie, who had been sitting in the corner smoking and watching contentedly. "I don't know," he said hopelessly. "They just keep coming. Where do they come from? And how can there be so many of them?" He slumped down on his cot dejectedly.

"Look, Al," said Marjorie gently. "Regardless of our deal, word about what you do is bound to get out. If each of these people tell only one other, their ranks are going to swell, even without anybody advertising the matter."

"Yes, but sometimes it seems like a waste of time. Ten or fifteen poor, frightened, lonely people every night that we can help—when there must be hundreds, even thousands out there that we can't—what good does that do?"

"Don't think of it like that," she replied encouragingly. "It's like my daddy used to tell me. 'Think of what you are doing, not of what you're not doing.'"

"I guess you're right. But every day—counsel the winos, serve the drinks, clean the bar, heal the sick..."

"Maybe what you need is some time off," broke in Marjorie. "One day a week when you can do anything you want. Sort of get your head together, like the young people used to say."



"I think maybe you're right, Marjorie," said Al, brightening. "But what I really need is a relief bartender. I told Mr. Duckworth I'd find one, but I just haven't had the time. And I have a dinner to go to next week."

"I know someone who'd be just perfect for the job," she mused. "You remember that little girl, Suzie? The one you healed your first night? The one with that tumor?"

"Headache," corrected Al.

"Tumor!" she insisted firmly.

"Oh, have it your way!" He threw his hands up in defeat. "I guess there's no use pretending to you after so many nights of this!" He pointed out the window to the few homeless people still milling about the alley.

"Never mind that now," she told him. "But the fact is, Suzie has been looking for a job. Now that she's got her health back, she's in a much better frame of mind. But it's tough for her. She lives on the street, has no clean clothes, not even a phone where a prospective employer can get in touch with her. And she adores you!" She stubbed out her cigarette and grinned slyly at Al. "She talks about you all the time, says you saved her life. She'd do anything for you. Why not give her a try?"

Al thought for a minute. "Sure, why not?" he said finally. "She's young, probably quite attractive under all that grime, and good-natured. Sure, bring her around at about four tomorrow afternoon, and I'll begin her training. I'll pay her a reasonable sum out of my own tip money (I still don't know what to do with it all). I'll find her a decent place to live, get her some presentable clothes..." He was pacing around the room, quickly working out the details.

"Sure, 'Professor Higgins'," chuckled Marjorie. "I'll bring her around tomorrow. But you get some sleep now. You must be exhausted."

"Marjorie," Al yawned suddenly. "I think I will do just that."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The night after Al's conversation with Rick concerning his bar tab, Simona, Rick and Wanda arrived at The Last Resort at about 9:00 to find the place packed with hip-looking thrill seekers. Rick was dressed as Al had requested, in "starving artist splendor"—black turtleneck shirt, faded blue jeans, and a light tan corduroy jacket with dark brown elbow patches. This last complemented his long sandy-colored hair which fell in ringlets down his back. He had even trimmed his beard and mustache for the occasion.

"What's the mystery?" Wanda asked Rick. "You wouldn't tell us anything on the way down."

"I don't know myself," admitted Rick as they entered the bar through the swinging wooden saloon doors. "But I think it must be something about my bar tab."

"So, Al noticed your bar tab, did he?" asked Wanda bitterly. "That's just great! Now we'll be eighty-sixed out of the last bar in town that'll give us credit. What did Duckworth say about this? I thought you were pretty tight with him."

"BJ wasn't there. It looks like Al's really taken over the place. But you know Al. He's a righteous dude. I don't think it's anything bad. He's up to something."

"Yeah, Al's always up to something," remarked Simona with noticeable irritation. Her manner this evening was completely different from her usual sparkling, party-girl personality. In fact, she had had to be persuaded to come down to the bar tonight with Rick and Wanda. She unceremoniously plumped herself down on a barstool and complained, "Seems like we're always wasting our time in this crummy joint—at least since the Great Al started working here. What's the attraction, anyway? It's just another bar."

"What's eating you tonight, Simona?" Rick asked in a worried voice, as they found an empty booth and sat down. "You didn't say a word on the way down here and now all you can do is badmouth Al. I thought you liked the guy."

“That’s just the trouble. He’s a guy! I guess I’ve had too much of guys lately.” She turned away pensively. “Just get me a drink, will you, Rick?”

“Sure. Campari and soda as usual?”

“No, scotch and soda tonight. I may as well tie one on for a change!”

“Scotch—you?” asked Wanda incredulously. “Now I know there’s something wrong. You never drink the hard stuff. Come on, tell Wanda all about it,” she coaxed, putting her arm around Simona’s shoulders while Rick went to the bar to get the drinks.”

“Oh, Wanda!” said Simona, snuffling a bit. “I guess I might as well tell you. I just had a big fight with Tim this morning. I went over to his place—you know, that cute little cottage he rents over on South Van Ness. Well, I went over there—he gave me a key to the place and I go over to clean up and do the dishes every once in a while—you know how men are! I went over there at about eleven in the morning because he was supposed to be at work then. He has a part-time messenger job to supplement his theater income—what little of it there is! So I opened the door with my key and there he was—at that time of the morning!—sitting in front of the TV in his underwear, watching cartoons and drinking tequila out of the bottle. The place was absolutely filthy, looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in months, and I’d just been there last week! There was dirty laundry all over the living room, crusty dishes molding in the sink, and he’s just sitting there, getting drunk!” Simona paused and gestured in a hopeless fashion. “So, you know, naturally I asked him what was going on, was he sick or something, and do you know what he said to me? This guy I’ve been dating more or less exclusively for the last three years? He tells me, ‘None of your business—I just didn’t feel like working today.’ He didn’t feel like it! This guy who only a little over a week ago hits me up for a hundred bucks for his rent—well, I guess I kinda lost it. I said a few choice things to him, threw his keys at him and stormed out. It really pissed me off, you know? But I’ve been feeling really bad about it ever since, for some reason. So that’s why,” she concluded, blowing her nose on the bar napkin Wanda offered her, “I guess I haven’t been in the best of moods today.”

“Don’t worry, honey,” Wanda patted her on the shoulder. “He’ll get over it. I bet he calls you tomorrow to apologize.”

“I hope so. But I’m not going to hold my breath.”

Rick, meanwhile, was standing at the bar with several other customers who were all waiting their turn to order drinks. When Al finally saw him he said only, “Ah, there you are, Rick. You remember our little talk last night?” Rick nodded. He filled Rick’s drink order quickly, saying, “Take the drinks over to the two ladies and then come right back.”

Rick did as he was told, setting the drinks down in front of Simona and Wanda. Wanda was still consoling Simona so they barely noticed when Rick immediately went back toward the bar. When he arrived, Al greeted him with a conspiratorial grin. “Now just listen to what I say and follow my lead. Do you understand?” Rick nodded again.

Al quickly reached under the bar, brought out the gong and struck it a hard blow with the felt-tipped hammer. He then jumped up onto the bar and watched in satisfaction as a hush fell over the room and many of the patrons nervously checked their watches to see if they were really out of it and it was already time for last call.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” began Al in a loud professional voice. “In keeping with our policy here at The Last Resort of attempting to bring you the best in drinks, good times and culture, we have a special treat for you tonight. Here with us is the famous native California sculptor, Mr. Richard Hedges.” He pointed to Rick who looked around, blinking and grinning stupidly. “Mr. Hedges,” Al continued in the same tone, “is beginning a lengthy and important project called, what was it again, Mr. Hedges?” Al leaned down and put his ear to Rick’s mouth and then straightened up again. “Ah, yes, a very exciting project called ‘Portraits of the Present’—a series of sculptures, busts in bronze—of ordinary California men and women just like yourselves. And here’s the best part,” he paused tantalizingly in the manner of a carnival barker. “Since this is one of Mr. Hedges very favorite night clubs in the Bay Area...” There were loud shouts and applause from his audience. “He has decided to give you, our fine customers, first choice at being so honored. For the incredibly small sum of two hundred dollars each, Mr. Hedges

will sculpt, from any picture of your choice, your likeness in bronze which will become a major part of this important exhibition. Plus, you will be entitled to submit your autobiographical details (twenty-five words or less, please) to be engraved on the base of the sculpture. But that's not all!" The crowd was now hanging on his every word with breathless anticipation. "The first twelve of you to sign up for this historic event will receive, at no extra cost, a slightly smaller plaster replica of your bust, suitable for displaying in the privacy of your own home, office, or wherever. Please form a line at the bar and have your money ready if you want to take advantage of this fantastic, once-in-a-lifetime offer. No pushing or shoving, please. Oh, and be sure to make out your checks to the artist, Mr. Richard Hedges."

By the time Al had finished his pitch, the crowd was in a frenzy. There were screams and shouts of "Out of my way!" and "I was here first!" and "Do you take MasterCard?" When the dust had finally settled, Rick was the bewildered possessor of about \$3,000.

"I can't believe this!" he said, counting the proceeds for the third time. "Uh, what do I do now?"

Al motioned him back behind the bar. As they squatted down behind it, Al whispered, "Okay, this is the way it is. First, my agent's fee. I believe ten percent is customary. So you owe me three hundred off the top for my, ah, 'charity' programs. Now, that leaves twenty-seven hundred. Let's say your time and materials cost—what was your high estimate again?—fifty dollars each. So let's call it an even seven hundred. That leaves two thousand. Your bar tab is rapidly approaching one thousand, so we'll just split the rest. So just sign all your checks over to The Last Resort." Rick, still crouched down behind the bar, took a pen from Al and started doing so. When he had finished, Al flipped through them rapidly, counting the take. When he was satisfied, he opened the cash register, put the checks under the drawer, and counted out a sum of money which he handed to a bewildered Rick.

"But, Al," he said dumbly after he had counted it. "There's a thousand dollars here, and I didn't even do anything for it."

"Don't worry, you will. When they give you their pictures and bios—if they do—just make them a cheap plaster bust and scratch

your name on it. And there you have it—a priceless Hedges original! I think they got off cheap for two hundred.”

Rick returned to the booth in a daze. On his way he was cheered lustily and clapped on the back by a long series of well-wishers. As he rejoined Wanda and Simona, Wanda bowed to him sardonically.

“Well, if it isn’t the great sculptor, Richard Hedges, come to grace our table!”

“You mean the great native California sculptor, Richard Hedges,” grinned Simona, who had recovered her good humor.

“Don’t rub it in, you guys,” said Rick sheepishly. “Did you know—this was all just to pay off my bar tab?”

“Love that Al!” exclaimed Simona and Wanda together and they all three succumbed to a fit of the giggles.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

As Al gradually became more adjusted to his demanding schedule, he found that one of the things he enjoyed the most was his early afternoons. After going to bed at sometime after five in the morning, he would usually arise at about noon and quickly drink a large mug of strong black coffee. Thus fortified, he could anticipate the afternoon stretching before him, demanding nothing but that he enjoy himself until four o’clock arrived.

So each afternoon, armed with \$20 from his tip jar, Al would wander the streets of San Francisco, choosing a different section of the City each day. Whether it was warm and sunny or cool and rainy (for the winter weather was just beginning to settle in), he took a great delight in observing the variety of people and places which surrounded him.

One afternoon he might be found in Chinatown, eating eggrolls and steamed pork buns and jabbering with the counter lady in perfect Cantonese (for he found that he could pick up a person’s language through his thoughts). The next, he might be in the Mission

District, working his way through a super burrito while talking to the taqueria owner in the street Spanish of the Mexican community.

It was on returning from one of these daily jaunts at about four that he saw not only the usual crowd of middle-aged alcoholics waiting for him at the entrance to the Last Resort, but Suzie as well.

"Hi!" she greeted him warmly. "Margie told me you wanted to see me. Something about a job?"

"Thank you for coming, Suzie," he replied. "I may indeed have a position for you if you're interested." She nodded her head eagerly to indicate that she was. "Then would you please wait for me in my room while I have my session with these gentlemen? It will take only two hours or less."

"Sure thing, no problem. I got nothin' else to do anyway. I'll just read the paper while I wait." She dug into the rear pocket of her grimy jeans and brought forth a tattered *Bay Weekly*.

He led her to the back room, where she nonchalantly sprawled out on the cot, seemingly as relaxed and at home as if it were her place and not his.

His session with the Attitude Adjustment Hour Club that afternoon was concluded rather more quickly than usual, though he did seem to have an inordinate interest in the details of Norman's new job. He gave them their requisite two drinks each and, exhorting them to give their all for Al and country, turned them perfunctorily out into the street. It was only 5:30, but the cheerful club members did not seem to notice.

After closing and locking the steel security gate behind them, Al went back to his little room and tapped lightly on the door. "Suzie," he called out. There was no answer. He opened the door and saw she was still lying on his cot, now fast asleep. He removed the tattered newspaper from her face and tapped her gently on the shoulder. "Suzie," he said again softly. "Wake up."

Quick as a flash she curled herself tightly into a fetal position, crying out, "No! Go 'way! Leave me alone!" in great distress.

Al shook her gently again. "Don't worry," he told her soothingly. "It's only me."

This time she woke up, uncurled herself, sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Oh, it's you, Al," she said more calmly. "I guess I must have

been dreaming.” She stretched her arms toward the ceiling, yawned and arched her back. “I thought I was sleeping in the alley and some guy was trying to rip me off.”

She stood up, yawned again, and then said more cheerfully. “Okay, I’m all yours. So what do you want me to do, scrub the place down, sweep the floors, wash the windows? Whatever you want, I can do it. I can even paint a little.” She frowned up at him in a defiant manner. “But it’ll cost you! I get two dollars an hour and you have to give me the supplies. I don’t work cheap, you know!”

“No, Suzie, you’ve got the wrong idea,” Al reassured her. “It’s nothing so menial as that. What I need is a relief bartender. You would have to work a minimum of one night a week, on Mondays and possibly some other nights as well. The hours are from eight at night until two in the morning, not including setup and cleanup time. For this I will pay you fifty dollars for every day you work, in cash. And, of course, you may keep all your tips.”

Suzie’s lower jaw dropped in astonishment. “Al!” she said in a hushed tone. “That would be just so cool!” She frowned again. “But there’s just one thing.” She stood up on tiptoes and whispered in Al’s ear as he bent his head down slightly to hear her. “I just remembered. I don’t know the first thing about bartending.”

Al straightened up again. “That is just what I told Mr. Duckworth when I started this job. I myself have only been here a little over a week, you know. But it’s easy, Suzie. First, let me show you where everything is.”

An hour later Suzie still was not getting it.

“I thought all you street people were familiar with alcoholic beverages,” complained Al, after she had failed yet again to discern the difference between a margarita and a daiquiri.

“That depends,” frowned Suzie, the unaccustomed concentration causing furrows to appear in her usually smooth, unlined face. “Street liquor’s one thing, and bar liquor’s another. I mean I can tell you the exact difference between Schlitz Malt Liquor and Old English 800. Or why Mad Dog 20-20 is better than Night Train. But I just don’t get these fancy drinks. They all look and taste pretty much the same to me. I ain’t even heard the names of most of ‘em.”



“Oh, Suzie, Suzie, Suzie!” said Al in mock exasperation. He put his hands on his hips and drew himself up to his full height of six-two, towering over her by at least a foot. He looked down at her with a steely gaze. “I think that in your case we will have to use the ‘Al’ method of instruction.” With his finger he beckoned her to come closer.

She looked at him apprehensively and backed a few steps away. “What’re you gonna do now, Al? I don’t go in for no kinky stuff.”

“This is just a little something to help you remember things,” replied Al reassuringly. He touched her lightly on the forehead. “Like what we did when you had the headaches.”

Suzie’s face brightened and she hopped up onto a barstool, cheerfully swinging her legs like a schoolgirl. “Sure! Why didn’t you say that in the first place?” She closed her eyes. “Do your stuff, holy man,” she said playfully.

“This time,” said Al, placing the fingers of his right hand directly between her eyes. “I will do all the work.”

About a minute later he removed his hand from her face.

“Wow!” She twisted her neck from side to side. “Now I’m awake!”

“Al right, Suzie, tell me the difference between a margarita and a daiquiri.”

“That’s easy!” she said quickly. “Margarita—tequila, triple sec, lemon-lime juice and a salt rim on the glass. Daiquiri—rum, light or dark, and difference kinds of fruit juice, like strawberry or peach—usually blended with crushed ice.”

“Good,” he replied. “Now, what’s the difference between a martini and a manhattan?”

“Martini,” she recited, rolling her eyes up at the ceiling as if the answer was written there. “Gin or vodka, dry vermouth, usually with olive or a twist, on the rocks (with ice) or straight up (without). The drier the martini, the less vermouth. A manhattan is the same as a martini, only with bourbon instead of gin or vodka, and a cherry instead of an olive or a twist.”

“And a gibbon?” he asked casually.

"That's a gin martini with a cocktail onion instead of an olive!" Suzie clapped her hands in delight and spun around on the bar stool.

"By George, I think she's got it!" said Al to no one in particular.

He turned to Suzie, who was still twirling and humming happily to herself. "Now—" He put his hands on her shoulders, stopping her in mid-twirl. "Now that you're thinking like a bartender, we have to dress you like a bartender. Do you have any good clothes?"

She looked down at herself in dismay. "These are my good clothes," she said ruefully.

"I thought as much." Al picked up the phone behind the bar.

"Tell me," he asked her, "do you like shopping? If you don't have to pay for it, that is?"

"Sure," she replied. "What girl doesn't?"

He punched in a phone number. After a short pause he spoke into the receiver. "Hello? Is this The Madhouse on Page Street? Good, is Simona there? Yes, Simona Wing. I'll wait."

Simona was indeed there. She was in her room, assiduously painting her toenails, when Bear knocked on her door.

"You in there, Simona? Some guy on the phone for you."

"Rats!" she replied, putting down her polish and swinging her legs carefully over the side of the bed. "I hope it's not a job. I don't need the money just yet." She stood up and hobbled down the hall on her heels to the pay phone in the hall. She picked up the dangling receiver and said into the mouthpiece, "Yes? Simona Wing here."

"Simona," said a smooth voice in her ear. "This is Al, from The Last Resort. I'm so happy to find you at home. And how are you this evening?"

"Just fine, Al," Simona answered automatically, wondering what was going on.

"I want you to know, Simona," he began, "that the few times I've seen you, I've become quite a fan of your wardrobe. You dress so distinctively, yet tastefully."

"Uh, thanks, I guess," replied Simona, wondering what he was getting at. Was Al gay and asking for her advice about a drag costume?

"Are you doing anything tomorrow during the daytime?" he continued.

"Um, no, I don't think so. Uh, what'd you have in mind?" she replied, her heart beating a little faster. Was Al straight and asking her for a date?

"I wonder if you could do something for me. I have a girl here who needs work clothes for a bartending job. A lovely girl, young, pretty. She needs something conservative, businesslike, but flattering to her face and figure. I trust you know what I mean. Would you take her shopping tomorrow if I give you a hundred dollars plus some money for your time and expertise. Would that sum be sufficient to purchase a nice outfit?"

"Sure," answered Simona curtly, back down to earth again. "I get my stuff mostly at thrift stores and garage sales and then fix it up so it looks nicer than it really is. For a hundred I can get her three or four really nice outfits and still have some left over."

"Wonderful!" was his response. "What time should I send her over to The Madhouse?"

"Oh, anytime around noon is okay, I guess. Just leave it to me. By tomorrow night I'll have her looking like a million."

"Thanks, Simona. And, as I believe the saying goes, I owe you one."

He hung up the phone. "Job, clothes..." he mentally checked his list, then turned to Suzie. "Where do you live?" he asked her.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Any place I can," she replied truthfully.

"How would you feel about having a permanent place to live?"

"That would be totally great!" she said excitedly. "But I don't have any money."

He looked at the clock on the wall behind the bar. It was nearly seven. "Just enough time," he muttered to himself. To Suzie he said abruptly, "Come on, let's go find you a place to live. Don't worry about the money. Just leave everything to me."

They walked out into the November darkness and headed north towards Market Street. At First and Market they quickly caught an outbound 31-Balboa bus which took them up Market to Turk and Taylor on the edge of the Tenderloin. There they got off and walked

the few blocks to Eddy and Leavenworth. They entered a small, dingy gray building grandly called the Hotel Olympia and walked across the threadbare carpet past a few elderly pensioners who were snoozing in chairs in front of a flickering black-and-white television.

They approached the desk and waited there for a moment while the man behind it finished distributing mail into various numbered slots. In a short while he turned around, saw who it was and said in a startled voice, "Why, Al, what are you doing here?"

"Hello, Norman," replied Al in a friendly manner. "I was so interested in hearing about your new job that I came down to see how it was going."

"Great, Al, just great! Since I stopped drinking all the time and got this job, I feel like a human being again for the first time in years! And I have you to thank for all this. Anything I can ever do for you, Al, just let me know." He shook Al's hand vigorously and looked at him respectfully.

"As a matter of fact, Norman, now that you mention it, there is a little something you could do for me. Or rather for this young lady." He indicated Suzie.

Norman looked at her for the first time. Suzie gave him a wave of her hand and smiled at him winningly.

"Sure, Al, anything," said Norman again. "Need a room for you and your 'girlfriend', do you? Would that be by the hour or for the whole night?"

"No, no!" snapped Al impatiently. "Nothing like that! This woman," he said with dignity, "is a new employee of The Last Resort, and as such, she needs a permanent place to live. Tell me, Norman," he looked directly into his eyes, "what is your normal occupancy rate?"

"Oh, I don't know," replied Norman, trying to avoid Al's gaze but failing. "Maybe seventy-five, eighty percent. Why do you want to know?"

"So you always have rooms available?" pursued Al, ignoring his question.

"Sure," said Norman with a shrug. "There's lots of hotels like this around this area and this place ain't exactly the Hilton. But we

do okay. Our rooms are clean and safe.” A hint of professional pride was in his voice.

“How much by the month?” asked Al.

“Well, that depends on how big a room you want, and how nice of a view. But mostly they go for four hundred to six hundred a month.”

Al was still holding Norman’s eyes with his own. Now he leaned over and spoke softly into his ear. “Here’s what I want you to do. Give her the best room you have. Her name is not to be listed in any of the hotel records. If anyone asks specifically for the room you have given her, say it’s being remodeled or something.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out a wad of bills, peeled off several and handed them to Norman. “Here’s two hundred. Put it in your pocket. I will give you the same amount, in cash, every month that this arrangement is necessary. How many other desk clerks does this hotel employ?”

“Just two other guys. Rodney, the day clerk, and some relief guy that works when we have days off,” replied Norman, quickly pocketing the money.

Al peeled a few more bills off his roll. “Give this to them, and explain our arrangement. If they have any trouble with this, call me immediately and I will take care of it.” He looked at Norman even more intensely. “Do we have a deal?”

“Room 601,” he replied in a business-like tone. “Large bed, good mattress, couch, two chairs, television, private bath with shower. Here’s the key.” He handed it to Al who in turn handed it to Suzie.

“I believe this is yours,” Al remarked.

Suzie had been watching the conversation between Norman and Al more or less disinterestedly, her eyes wandering about the hotel lobby. Now, however, she grabbed the proffered key tightly and gave a little cry of disbelief. “I don’t know what to say!” she said, fairly bubbling over with excitement. “Wow, my own room! I can’t wait to see it!” She skipped over to the elevator and pressed the button several times but, unable to contain her impatience, began bounding up the stairs, Al following close behind.

They quickly reached Room 601 and Suzie opened the door. Inside, everything was as Norman had said. She threw herself down on the bed and then began jumping up and down on it like a child.

"Wow, Al!" she exclaimed, bouncing off the bed onto the floor. She stood up on tiptoes and threw her arms around his shoulders. "This is so neat!" she enthused. "I could just kiss you!"

"No need for that," he replied, hastily disengaging her and stepping back a pace. "Just remember what you have to do." He began to tick the items off on his fingers. "Tonight, go back to that wretched alley and remove any possessions you consider worth keeping and bring them over here. Tomorrow, go to Page and Fillmore about noon and ask for Simona Wing. She will take you shopping. The address is 578 Page. I'll write it down for you so you won't forget. That gives you a few days to settle in and do whatever you want. But next Monday," he cautioned her sternly, "come to The Last Resort at seven-thirty in the evening and be ready to work until two-thirty in the morning. I'll be with you that night to make sure you have no problems with the job or the customers. After that, any night you work, you'll be more or less on your own. Although, I'm sure Mr. Duckworth will be giving you the benefit of his vast experience. But no matter. I'll introduce you to Mr. Duckworth on Monday. He's the owner of the bar," Al explained. "I'm the manager and you work for me."

She listened to his admonishments with good humor. "Sure, Al, anything you say." Then she went back to bouncing on the bed. A few minutes later she started playing with the TV. So intent was she on her new possessions, she didn't even hear Al leave, closing the door gently behind him.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

**T**he morning after the Lawrence Livermore conference, Assistant FBI Director Jack Tanner was sitting behind the large desk in his private office in the Federal Building on Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco. He was not a happy man. Though it still lacked several minutes of 9:00, he had already been

at his desk for over an hour, working and puzzling over yesterday's revelations.

Nor had his mood been improved by the phone call he had received about fifteen minutes earlier from National FBI Headquarters in Washington DC, from a personal aide to the Director himself, no less. Somehow the Director had already received information about the meeting of the previous day. Tanner's instructions were clear, the aide had told him. He was to solve this "alien" case as quickly and quietly as possible. The Director, it seemed, was worried about this story falling into the hands of the tabloids, and he was determined to hold Tanner personally responsible if it did. Or, as the Director's aide so succinctly put it, "If this story gets out, the FBI will be the laughingstock of law enforcement agencies everywhere. And if it does, the Director has personally told me to inform you that your future in law enforcement will be as an assistant file clerk in the Anchorage office. Why the hell did you volunteer the bureau to head up this wild goose chase, or should I say, wild 'alien' chase in the first place?"

Why indeed? Tanner had only been in charge of the West Coast Region for less than three years. His tenure thus far had been moderately successful, but undistinguished. He supposed he had volunteered the Bureau's leadership in this matter in a desperate attempt for personal recognition. Now, he had his recognition, all right, but it was definitely giving him feelings of ambivalence. Correctly handled, this case could make his career. But unfortunately, despite his take-charge attitude of the previous day, he didn't have a clue as to how to proceed in this matter. The whole idea of "Project X" was driving him up the wall. Alien activity in San Francisco? How could anyone tell? And who would notice, for that matter? This city had always had more than its share of loonies and crackpots anyway. He began to realize the futility of his task.

He looked over at the large gold-framed portrait hanging on the wall to the right of his desk. "Well, Edgar," he mused aloud, "what would you make of all this? How would you proceed?" Probably, he thought to himself, old Hoover would use Project X as an excuse to round up for questioning every suspected Commie and student radical he could get his hands on. Which could turn out to be a

sizeable percentage of the City's population, then and now. In spite of his hopeless state of mind, he smiled and mimed a toast to the memory of the Bureau's first Director. Somehow he felt better.

A loud buzz from the intercom on his desk interrupted his thoughts.

"Yes?" he said into the speaker.

"Special Agent Kelly has arrived, sir," was the reply.

"Good, good!" he exclaimed. "Send her in immediately."

The door opened and Kelly strode in briskly. She was youngish, probably not over thirty, with medium-length sandy-colored hair and large, expressive blue eyes. She was attired in standard FBI office wear for women—white blouse, black knee-length skirt, dark stockings and sensible black pumps.

She stopped in front of Tanner's desk. "Special Agent Deanna Kelly reporting as ordered, sir!" she said in military fashion.

"Please have a seat, Agent Kelly," replied Tanner, motioning to a large leather chair on the other side of his desk and to his left.

Kelly angled the chair so that it was directly facing Tanner and then sat, waiting expectantly for him to speak.

After a few seconds he began hesitantly. "You read the memo I sent you yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes, sir, I have, and quite frankly, I don't know what to think. The possible existence of extraterrestrials in the Bay Area? And in the memo you mentioned something about a device for locating the aliens? Just how would that work?"

"I don't know much more about this than you do, Kelly," he sighed heavily. "But I am given to understand that this portable device which is described as being somewhat like a Geiger counter will be made available to us soon, hopefully by the end of the week. I'm told that you point it at the suspected alien," he said, standing up and aiming his finger like a weapon, "and it's supposed to click or something. That is, if the person is an alien. Or whatever," he finished lamely.

He sat down again, took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, as if trying to rid himself of the vision of the FBI hunting down aliens with some kind of weird ray gun.



“That’s why I want you to be the field agent in charge of this project, Kelly,” he continued more hopefully. “We need your ‘anything’s possible’ attitude. Your open-minded practicality. And that incredible intuition of yours, which some people here at the Bureau say borders on the psychic.” He leaned toward her and said in a confidential whisper, “I shouldn’t tell you this, but I just received a phone call from the Director himself! My job is definitely on the line here. I’m counting on you to solve this case quickly and with a minimum of publicity.”

Kelly considered what he had said. “Thank you, sir, for your compliments,” she replied after a time. “And I assure you, I’ll do my best. But with all due respect, I do wish you’d give me something to go on. How do I proceed? Do I just wander the streets of San Francisco pointing this device randomly at people? They’ll think I’m deranged! And then, if the device should make a positive identification, what do I do then? Do I arrest the unlucky person and read him his rights? And if he says, ‘What’s the charge?’ do I tell him, ‘Suspicion of being an extraterrestrial’? They’d lock me up and throw away the key!”

Tanner looked as if he’d just eaten something disagreeable. “Look, Kelly,” he pleaded, “it’s not so bad as all that. Every local law enforcement agency in the Bay Area will be working on Project X. They will presumably get tips, leads and other information. They will then evaluate this information and pass on to us only what seems to be worth following up. That’s what you’ll be doing.”

He got up from behind his desk and began pacing back and forth in an agitated manner. He wished he hadn’t given up smoking.

“One other thing,” he continued, pausing in front of Kelly’s chair and looking her full in the face. “Even though this alien thing will most probably turn out to be nothing at all and be completely forgotten in a few weeks, there is just the slightest chance that there may be some danger involved. So I want you to have a partner on this assignment, someone who’s strong as an ox and absolutely fearless. Someone who’s never let any harm come to anyone under his protection. Someone who’s a weapons expert as well!” He realized he was getting carried away, and he paused for a moment to regain control. When he had recovered himself, he told her in a

lower voice, "I couldn't think of anyone suitable in the Bay Area. Everyone here is too soft. So I called the LA office and asked that Special Agent Muldoon be transferred up here for the duration. Good man, maybe you've heard of him?" he asked innocently.

Kelly looked at him in astonishment. "Muldoon? Agent Fred Muldoon? Special Agent Fred 'Lone Wolf' Muldoon?" She shook her head in disbelief.

"Why, yes." Tanner was perplexed by her reaction. "I see you've heard of him. Just the man for the job, don't you think?"

"But sir," said Kelly helplessly, "Muldoon?"

"Now, don't worry," Tanner tried to reassure her. "After all, you'll be in full charge of this project. I just want a reliable man to be with you at all times. In case of danger."

"But, sir," Kelly said again. She gave him a look of disappointment. "In case you didn't know, Muldoon has a reputation for being the most hard-headed, hard-nosed, by-the-book agent on the West Coast. Maybe in the entire Bureau. And his politics—he makes Reagan look like a bleeding-heart liberal. He's—he's a neanderthal, sir!"

"Now, Kelly, he may be a little rough around the edges," he began, clearly surprised by her attitude.

"And he hates women!" she broke in. "And he doesn't believe in any kind of intuition, male or female!"

Tanner had had enough. "Special Agent Kelly!" he snapped, sitting back down at his desk and looking at her sternly. "I'm surprised at you! Pull yourself together, that's an order! You have your assignment! You have your partner! Muldoon's flying up from LA this afternoon. We three will have a meeting here tomorrow morning at nine o'clock to talk about how to proceed." He leaned forward across the desk and spoke more softly. "And please, Kelly, try to make this work. For your sake. For my sake. Christ, even for Muldoon's sake. You don't know how lucky we are to have him with us on the project."

"Do you know what Muldoon does when he hears the words 'space alien'?" she replied stiffly. "He laughs. He slaps his knees with those big, hairy-knuckled hands of his and guffaws." She paused for a moment and then continued, "But don't worry, sir. I'll be on my best

behavior. If anything goes wrong, it won't be my fault! Permission to leave, sir?"

Without waiting for a reply, she stood up straight, performed a perfect military about-face, and marched out of the office without another word.

Tanner looked at the ceiling and muttered a few choice curses at Auslander. Then he went out to buy a pack of cigarettes.

The day after the great sculpture scam, Rick woke at about noon, and noticed that Wanda had left a note on her pillow. "Hanging out in the Haight," it said, "See you around dinner time." As he yawned and stretched he wondered about the events of last night. Had it all been real, or was it just the result of one too many joints before bedtime? He slowly got out of bed and went to the closet where he remembered stashing his backpack the night before. He opened a zippered pocket on the side and discovered that it was all true—there in the pocket was \$1,000 in cash, his cut from Al's confidence game.

"I'm rich!" he cried out, flinging money into the air. Then the full impact hit him and he came down to earth quickly. Immediately he thought of Marty. When was the last time he had paid any rent? He vaguely remembered having come into some money around Labor Day. Quickly, he dressed and stuffed the money into his jeans. Consulting the astrological calendar on the wall, he frowned. "Labor Day!" he exclaimed. "That was two months ago! I must've totally spaced out October!" He thought for a moment. "Good karma means payin' your dues, dude," he told himself sternly.

He hurried downstairs and knocked on the door to Marty's study.

"Door's open," came the response.

Rick entered and saw Marty sitting in an armchair, peacefully reading *The Plague* by Albert Camus. "Don't you ever go to sleep, man?" Rick asked him, yawning again. "You're up until five or six in the morning listening to other people's problems. Now I come down here at noon and you look like you've been up for hours."

Marty grinned. "So who's got time to sleep? What's on your mind, Rick?"

“Um, I wanted to talk to you about the rent, Marty. I know I haven’t been exactly regular...”

Marty looked at the ceiling. “Let’s see, you’ve lived here two and a half years, you’ve paid eight months’ rent, the last time being two months ago. But who’s counting?” He gave Rick an approving nod. “You’re a good guy. I like having you around, and we’re making it okay at the moment. So—no problem.” He went back to reading *The Plague*.

“Uh, no, Marty, you don’t understand,” Rick began again. “I mean, I want to pay you some.”

Marty instantly put down his book and looked at Rick fondly. “Pay me some?” he repeated. He jumped up and ran over to his desk, saying “Hold that thought!” He pulled out a large old-fashioned leather-bound ledger. “Let’s see,” he said, thumbing through it. “Ah, here we are—Hedges. So, are you just throwing me a bone? Or can you spare as much as one hundred?”

“I thought, to be fair,” replied Rick slowly, “I’d just get the last two months out of the way.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wad. As he peeled off the bills, he counted them carefully. “Three-forty, three-sixty, three-eighty, four hundred. There! Are we all squared away?” He offered the money to Marty, who looked at it in open-mouthed amazement.

“Wait a minute!” Marty said suspiciously. “Where did you get all that money? Holding up liquor stores? Dealing drugs? No!” he exclaimed, his face darkening. “You’d better not be dealing! You know the house rules. Personal consumption only. And what about Wanda? You know how she is when it comes to the hard stuff! You don’t want to get her started again, do you? I swear, if I find out you’ve been dealing—”

“Honest to God, Marty!” Rick was shocked by this outburst. Marty was usually the most easygoing dude he knew. “It’s not like that at all. Me and Al cooked up this little sculpture scam last night. We got the rich yuppies to fork over two hundred bucks each for some mediocre plaster busts. By the time the smoke cleared, I was totally able to pay my bar tab. And I still had all this left over.” He patted his pocket.

"Al, huh?" Marty was still suspicious. "You and Al. Unless I miss my guess, Al was the guy that thought it up." He tapped his temple sagely with a forefinger.

Rick admitted that this was so.

"This guy, Al," Marty mused, "he really must be something special. Tell me, Rick," he said more directly. "What's he like? The girls spent hours talking about him one night last week, but I never got your side of it. What makes this guy tick, anyway?"

Rick thought for a minute. "Well, I don't really know how to put it in words," he said finally. "You know I'm gay, and yeah, he's a real hunk. But with him it's different somehow. I mean I'm like, attracted to him and all, but it's not just a physical thing, you know? I'll tell you one thing. He's real self-assured, a real take-charge dude. But that's not really it either." He paused and put his hand to his forehead. "It's weird, but I keep thinking I know more about Al than I remember. But how could I have forgotten anything about him? I've only known the dude for a little over a week now." He broke off, puzzled.

Marty considered this. "Well, he's coming here to dinner, let me see, a week from Monday. As you know, since you were at the meeting, this party is by invitation only. Since this Al guy seems to be such a guru," he said sarcastically, "I've drawn up a guest list of twelve of our best, most intelligent and intuitive house members. Which in most cases," he admitted, "doesn't really mean very much. In addition to me, and you, and Simona and Wanda, we've got Bear, Violet, Fawn—got to make it up to her for last time—and about five others. Our best and brightest. We'll feed him, give him lots of wine, get him stoned if he does that sort of thing and most important of all, we'll get him talking about himself. If that doesn't work, we'll sic Violet on him and see what she can find out with her tarot cards." He was getting really worked up, pacing around the room and waving his arms enthusiastically. "We'll find out what kind of guy this Al really is or die in the attempt!" he concluded dramatically, sitting down in his armchair once again.

Rick listened to this in silence. When Marty was finally through, he said, "Sounds like a plan, man. But right now I've got to split. For some reason I've got way too many mediocre sculptures to make." He gave a little groan. "Ah, well, the price of fame, I guess. If

anybody wants me, I'll be down in the basement workshop for, oh, about the next two weeks."

"Fame, my foot!" replied Marty, giving him a withering look. "Just be here a week from Monday. Eight o'clock sharp! I mean it, put it on your calendar. There's no way you want to miss this!" He chuckled and picked up *The Plague* again.

"Don't worry, Marty, you can count on me."

"Oh, and thanks for the rent, man. Now I can finally pay PG&E. Wow, gas and lights for the next month, at least!"

"Can it, Marty!" said Rick with a laugh. "You know that we know that you'll always keep this place going for all of us, no matter what it takes."

"I try, I try," he replied seriously. "Now, get the hell out here and get to work! You made your own bed, you know. And be sure to save me a Hedges original. Might be worth big bucks some day, you never know."

"Peace, man," said Rick simply, making the V-sign and going out the door.

"Richard Hedges, famous native California sculptor," Marty said to himself when Rick had left. "It could happen, who can tell? Rick's always had more talent than initiative. If this gets him off his ass, who knows what could happen?" He resumed reading *The Plague*, laughing out loud at the funny bits.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tuesday night at The Madhouse, Violet Miller is sitting in her room, her mind delving deep into the mysteries of the Qaballah, when a knock on the door brings her back to reality.

"Phone for you, Violet!" calls a voice.

"Coming," she replies shortly. She is a tall thin woman of about thirty, with long, straight-hanging black hair. She wears a shapeless black shift and, as she gets up off the bed, she slides her bare feet into a pair of ancient Persian carpet slippers.

She reaches the pay phone at the other end of the hall from her third-floor room and speaks quietly into the receiver. "Yes? Violet here. Who calls?"

"Violet Miller?" inquires a hesitant and slightly-accented woman's voice. "You probably don't remember me, but you read my tarot cards at the Haight-Ashbury Street Fair summer before last."

Violet thinks for a moment. "Hmmm," she finally says. "There were so many. Please give me a hint."

"Okay," says the woman, quite willing to play this game. "You advised me to leave my husband of two years, because you knew he would make me stay a simple housewife forever, tied by my apron strings to a bunch of kids, and you sensed that I wanted more than that."

"The vision is beginning to clear," Violet intones. "Please, do continue."

"Well, I did like you said and just walked out of our little apartment in the Mission District. This was at the end of June, a year and a half ago. Oh, you also advised me to take English lessons because I had been in this country only a few months and my accent was so bad."

"A light begins to dawn." Violet puts her fingers to her forehead. In a moment she exclaims, "No! It's not Rosa, is it? Rosa Valdez?"

"Yes, yes, it's me," says the voice with delight. "Only I'm Rosa Sanchez now. I took back my birth name when I left my husband. Anyway, I moved to Berkeley a little over a year ago now and took some English lessons, and then about six months ago I got this great job. So I promised myself that if I could ever do anything for you, I would."

"That's truly wonderful, Rosa. So what are you doing now?"

"Well," Rosa's voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've been working as a secretary-receptionist at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. And yesterday they had this top-secret, hush-hush meeting. You wouldn't believe some of the people who were there. And security was, how do you say, out of the behind. Anyway, we were all sworn to secrecy, had to sign a paper and everything, promising not to tell the subject or who was there. But, you know, who pays any attention to their stupid games?"

“Quite right,” Violet concurs dreamily. “There is no security this side of the grave.” With an effort she rouses herself from her reverie. “But what makes you think I’d be interested in this top-secret meeting?”

“Because,” says Rosa, still whispering, “the subject of the meeting just happened to be aliens—you know, space aliens, that some physics guy thinks could be right here in the Bay Area!”

“That’s astonishing!” Violet pricks up her ears with new interest. “Usually these ivory tower research lab types couldn’t care less about UFO’s, aliens, the spirit world. Hmmm, I wonder if this meeting could have anything to do with that article in the *Clarion* last week? You know, the one about lights over Golden Gate Park?”

“I know, I know!” says Rosa excitedly. “I saw that, too! And I thought, surely Violet would want to know about a strange meeting like this. Did I do right to tell you?”

“Rosa, thank you for this fascinating news. And I’m very happy to hear that you’re doing so well. But I don’t want you to get into any trouble over this.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that!” Rosa shrugs it off. “If the story gets out, those big shots will be too busy trying to blame each other. They won’t even think about a little nobody like me. But, seriously, what are you going to do with this story, Violet?”

“That’s a very good question,” Violet says, frowning just a bit. “But did you call it a ‘story’, Rosa? You know, that’s exactly what it is and what it should be. I’m going to call a friend of mine. I think this story would be right up her alley. Thanks, Rosa. May the Earth Mother hold you in her bosom forever.”

“Ha, ha,” Rosa giggles. “I love it when you get all spiritual. Maybe I come to the City and see you over the Christmas holidays, okay?”

“You do that, I’d love to see you again,” replies Violet. “Call me and let me know, okay?” As she hangs up the phone, she stands there in the hall for a moment, lost in thought. Then she pads back to her room and looks through her dresser drawer for her phone book and some change.



“Ah!” she finally exclaims. She goes back out to the pay phone. She drops in a quarter and then dials a number. In a moment she hears a voice say, “*Bay Weekly*, how may I direct your call?”

Wednesday morning at the office of Assistant FBI Director Jack Tanner, the intercom buzzes sharply.

“Yes?” says Tanner testily.

“Special Agent Kelly is waiting, sir,” says the disembodied voice of his temp secretary, somewhat reprovably it seems to him.

“Um, just a moment, I’m, uh, clearing away some paperwork,” he says, disconnecting the intercom with one hand and stubbing out the butt of a cigarette with the other. This was a no-smoking building, but Tanner didn’t care. He had been chain smoking for the last twenty-four hours (excluding sleep, which had been fitful) and didn’t seem to be able to stop.

He picks up the ashtray which is overflowing with butts and takes it to the lavatory which is part of his private executive office. He flushes the evidence down the toilet and then goes back in and sprays the entire room with air freshener.

“All right,” he says with as much authority as he can muster, switching on the intercom again. “Send in Agent Kelly immediately.” He manages to seat himself behind his desk before she enters, folds his hands on the desk in front of him and tries to look official.

Special Agent Kelly enters his office in exactly the same way as she did the previous morning and reports to her boss using exactly the same words. When Tanner offers her a seat, she takes the same chair and angles it in the same way she did yesterday.

“Sir,” she says formally. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Of course, Kelly!” he replies with some impatience. “We’re the only ones here. Just say what’s on your mind and get it over with!” He glances around the room nervously as if to verify the fact that they are, indeed, alone.

“Well, sir...” she begins, but stops abruptly, putting her hand to her face. “What’s that smell?” she asks, frowning and wrinkling her nose.

“Oh, er, that’s just my...new cologne,” stammers Tanner. “Bought it yesterday. Do you like it?”

"It seems a bit strong to me, sir," she replies, waving her hand in front of her face. "Maybe you should cut the dosage."

"Quite right, Kelly, quite right," he says, looking distracted. "I'll take it under advisement—er, I mean, yes, I'll do it!" He wipes his forehead with his pocket handkerchief and looks at it self-consciously. "Warm in here, don't you think?"

"Not to me. Look here, sir, are you quite all right?" she asks him. "You don't really seem yourself this morning."

"I know, I know!" Tanner begins sobbing and puts his head down on the desk for a moment. Then he quickly raises it again, sniffs once or twice, and applies the pocket handkerchief to his eyes and nose. "It's just this alien thing," he says petulantly, but regaining control. "I haven't been able to think about anything else for the last two days. What time is it?" he suddenly changes the subject and looks at his watch. "Nine-fifteen? Muldoon's late. He was supposed to be here at nine o'clock sharp."

"I'm sure he'll be here soon, sir," Kelly tries to reassure him.

"I can't wait to meet him!" Tanner exclaims, brightening a bit. "I wonder if he's as big as they say he is."

"I believe he's even bigger, sir," she says with a straight face.

"And his gun!" Tanner is enthusiastic now and ignores her satire. "He's supposed to carry a custom-made, pearl-handled forty-five caliber Colt Magnum. I can't wait to see that gun!"

"I'm sure he'll show you his, if you'll show him yours, sir," Kelly says in the same way.

"Show him mine? But there's nothing special about mine."

Tanner frowns suspiciously. "What are you getting at, Kelly?"

"Just an old joke, sir," she begins, but suddenly a commotion in the outer office interrupts her.

"I tell you, I have an appointment with Tanner!" Kelly and Tanner fall silent as a loud baritone voice penetrates the closed office door.

A fainter female voice answers nervously, "But Agent Muldoon! I've checked and rechecked Director Tanner's schedule for this morning and all it says is, 'Top-Secret Private Meeting with Kelly and Mulrooney at nine o'clock!'"

At that, Tanner bursts out of his office. "It's quite all right, Ms. Withers," he tries to smooth it over. "There seems to be a tiny little typo in my schedule. Not that it's your fault," he says quickly. "I'm supposed to be meeting with Kelly and Muldoon, not Kelly and Mulrooney."

"Well, sir," sniffs Ms. Withers, "how am I supposed to know? It says Mulrooney. He says he's Muldoon. I mean, how am I supposed to know?" she asks again, beginning to pace back and forth restlessly in front of her desk, her eyes growing wild. "I mean if you'd really wanted to see Mulrooney and I'd sent in Muldoon, well then, it would be all my fault, wouldn't it?" She begins to pull at her hair in an alarming way.

"There, there, Ms. Withers, it's not your fault." Tanner is trying to calm her down as Muldoon takes a seat in the corner, crosses his legs and watches the scene with some interest. Kelly is standing in the open office entrance, her mouth wide in astonishment.

"There, there," Tanner says again, patting her shoulder in a fatherly way. "I wasn't blaming you for anything. Please, I can see you're upset." She continues to pull at her hair, her eyes wilder than ever. "Here," he says in desperation, pulling a large wad of cash from his pocket. He peels off \$300 and puts it in her hand. "Please take this. Let's just tell the temp agency you worked the rest of the week, okay?" She closes her hand around the money and begins to calm down somewhat. "Don't worry about your time sheet. I'll take care of everything." He ushers the distraught temp to the hall door and gently closes it behind her.

"Interesting woman," comments Muldoon cheerfully after Tanner has seated both him and Kelly in front of his office desk. "Is this normal behavior for a San Francisco secretary?"

"Never mind that!" snaps Tanner. "You're twenty minutes late. What happened?"

"Not too much," shrugs Muldoon. "I was driving in my rental car on the way to your office when I saw this old man sitting on the steps of a rundown hotel drinking something out of a paper bag. Since I immediately suspected it was an alcoholic beverage—drinking in public is still illegal in this city, isn't it?—I approached the suspect carefully, hand on my gun, just in case..."

"Your gun, that reminds me," Tanner interrupts. "They say it's custom made and the biggest one in the whole district. Can I see it?"

"Sure," replies Muldoon affably, standing up. "Why not?" He is wearing a nondescript black suit with narrow black tie and white button-down dress shirt. He would look like an ordinary FBI agent but for two things: his size—he stands about six-four and is built like a block of granite; and his face, which seems chiseled out of the same material. His hair is so closely shaved in a buzz cut that its color, whatever that might be, is indistinguishable from that of his scalp. He unbuttons his jacket, snaps open his shoulder holster and displays to an envious Tanner the largest 45-caliber automatic that he's ever seen in his life.

"Can I—can I touch it" Tanner asks in awe, holding out his hand.

"Sure," He hands it to Tanner, cautioning him, "but hold it by the pearl handle. I don't want the chrome plating getting smudged."

Tanner takes it and holds it in both hands delicately, sighting along the barrel once or twice. Then he reluctantly returns it to Muldoon.

"Want to see what she can do? I call her Bertha, for my mom. You see that picture over there on the back wall?"

"Which one, President Bush?"

"No, the other one, the kid."

"Oh, you mean Vice President Quayle."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, at this distance I could take out both eyes with one shot."

"No! You mean it leaves a hole that big?"

Kelly, who is watching this display with increased frustration, finally stands up and says, "Gentlemen, please! There's enough testosterone in this room already, don't you think?"

"What's she talking about, Tanner?" Muldoon gently replaces his gun in his holster and snaps it shut.

"I think she means too much guy stuff," Tanner confides. "But she's right. What I'm supposed to do," he says, sitting back behind his desk and reassuming his official manner, "is brief the both of you on this alien thing."

At this, Muldoon laughs heartily and slaps his knee.

My God, Tanner thinks, Kelly was right. And his knuckles are hairy.

"I'm sorry, sir," Muldoon says, still chuckling a bit. "But this is the first time I've ever been assigned to track down the figments of somebody's imagination."

"Surely even you," Kelly speaks up defiantly, "can't deny the possibility that we might not be alone in the universe."

"No," agrees Muldoon, "not with all these Chinks running around." He winks at Tanner who has gone back to burying his face in his hands.

"Sir," Kelly appeals to Tanner, "make Muldoon retract that blatantly racial remark!"

"So, you're Special Agent Kelly, huh!" says Muldoon, looking at her appraisingly. "You're the one they say dances with the fairies." He stands up and minces around the room in a ludicrous imitation of a ballerina.

Kelly stands up suddenly and leans over Tanner's desk. "Make him stop, sir! This is the agent I have to work with on this case? I'd sooner slash my wrists!"

Tanner, with his face still buried in his hands, mumbles, "Stop fighting, children, or I'll have to separate you."

"He started it!"

"No, she started it!"

Kelly and Muldoon both point their fingers at each other.

Tanner stands up suddenly. "Both of you, stop this at once!" he orders, and begins to pace behind his desk. Then he says decisively, "Muldoon, take Kelly to lunch! Kelly, show Muldoon the sights of San Francisco. That's an order!" he says, his voice rising as Muldoon begins to open his mouth in protest. "And don't come back until you can work together as a team! This project is too big, too crucial..." His words trail off and he sits down again, not knowing what to say next.

"All right, sir," Kelly finally says. She stands up and offers her hand hesitantly to Muldoon. "Partners?"

He ignores her hand. Instead he says suddenly, "Know why they call me 'Lone Wolf' Muldoon, Kelly?"

"No, why?"

“Because none of my partners have stayed with me for more than a week. Some quit the Bureau, some just asked to be transferred. After a few years, they gave up trying to partner me. And I’ve been working by myself ever since.” He gestures toward the door and bows in a mocking manner. “After you, Special Agent Kelly.” He does another little ballerina twirl and opens the door for her.

She starts toward the door. “I want you both to know,” she says bitterly, “that ‘dancing with the fairies’ story is a complete fabrication. I don’t know where it got started.”

“Cheer up, Kelly,” he remarks as they leave the office. “Maybe I’ll let you shoot my gun.”

Assistant FBI Director Jack Tanner quickly lights another cigarette and puffs on it desperately.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

**V**iolet Miller spoke quietly but authoritatively into the phone. “I need the home telephone number of one of your employees, a Phyllis Dean. It’s quite urgent.”

Violet and Phyl had been acquainted with each other for several years, in fact, since before Phyl had started working at the Weekly. In those days she had been writing for the free neighborhood monthlies, for which she had gotten little money, but much experience and exposure. They had met when Phyl had interviewed Violet for one of those periodic “Spirituality and the Occult in the Bay Area” articles, and Violet had proved herself to the skeptical Phyl by reading her tarot cards, accurately predicting Phyl’s rise in the world of journalism.

Phyl and Violet had sized each other up, warily, and each had come away from the interview with a grudging respect for the other. Violet admired Phyl’s ambition and drive, but had no wish to emulate it. Phyl admired Violet’s calmness of spirit and psychic intuition without emulating either herself. In the last few years, however, Phyl had found herself more and more often asking for Violet’s advice as

to whether a story lead was worth following. Violet had not failed her yet.

The voice over the phone sounded apologetic. "I'm afraid that's not possible. I mean, it's not our policy to give out..."

"Don't worry, Lyle," broke in Violet with a laugh. "This is her friend, Violet, and I've just misplaced her number, that's all."

"Oh," said Lyle in a relieved voice. "Why didn't you say it was you, Violet? I'll go get it, won't take a minute."

After having obtained Phyl's number with no further trouble, Violet made the call.

"Hi, Phyl! Violet here. Have I got a story for you!"

After giving Phyl the details of the mysterious hush-hush top-secret UFO conference that had taken place at Lawrence Livermore the previous morning, she concluded by saying, "Come over here tomorrow morning about nine. My contact at the facility is sending me a complete list of the participants at this meeting, and she assures me it is big! Everyone from the FBI to the Pentagon to SETI seems to have been involved."

At the other end of the phone Phyl was positively drooling. "That's great! Get me that list and I know I can get someone to talk. Those middle-aged military types are suckers for a girl like me. You know, I knew there was something to that UFO story in the paper and this confirms it. Now, all I've got to do is convince that shithead Brockman to take me off this stupid assignment. I can't cover both at once."

"Oh, Phyl," Violet sounded sympathetic. "Has he got you digging up the dirt on PG&E again?"

"Yes, for about the fifth time this year!"

"Ah, well," murmured Violet. "My thoughts are with you. May the Earth Mother hold you in her bosom."

"May the Earth Mother get Brockman to come to his senses. There's more to life than persecuting the gas and electric company. But thanks anyway, Violet."

And with that she hung up and steeled herself for the call to Brockman.

A few hours after their meeting with Tanner, Muldoon and Kelly were driving around town in Muldoon's rented car, seeing the sights. They had just left SFPD Headquarters where they had checked in with Chief Jordan Franklin.

He had greeted them politely and promised to give them any leads to alien activity that his department might uncover. "But I'll tell you honestly," he had said. "Right now, we've got nothing and I like it that way. The quieter the better is my motto. Besides, we've always got our hands full with real police matters. Burglary, arson, homicide, that sort of thing. Not tracking down aliens. Besides, if we did find one, what would we charge it with, anyway?"

"I'd call up the INS," Muldoon had said, with an amused look at Kelly. "Ten to one, it hasn't had its passport stamped." Kelly was not amused.

"All the same," Franklin had continued, "For a change, I really appreciate the Bureau being in charge of this one. I wouldn't want to be in Tanner's shoes. The FBI's image is sure to take a major hit if the press finds out the Bureau's going after ET's. How's he taking it?"

"Not well, I'm afraid," replied Kelly. "He's smoking again, and I don't think he's shaved for two days."

"Yes, he did seem a little nervous and strung out," put in Muldoon. "If you ask me, that man's too emotional to be in such a high position of authority. Now if I were running the show..."

"Assistant Director Tanner is a fine man, Muldoon, brave and courageous," interrupted Kelly. "I'm sure he's just feeling a little out of his depth right now."

"All the same, I'd watch the guy. He looks like he could crack at any moment."

They had thanked Chief Franklin for his cooperation and were now driving west on Market toward the Castro District. Muldoon looked at his watch and said in his cheerful blunt manner, "Hey, it's almost one o'clock. Remember, Tanner ordered me to buy you lunch. So, where you want to go? I'm a stranger in town!"

Kelly looked at the immensity of her partner hunched over the steering wheel. He had rented the biggest car available, he had told



her, but still felt like a sardine in a can. "From the size of you," she commented, "any place with large chunks of meat will do."

"You got that right! Give me a real restaurant any time. I don't know what's happening to this country anyway. Sushi bars! Chinese slop on rice, all those vegetables. And those pissy little flower arrangements they call 'California Cuisine'! Yuck! And don't get me started on salad bars..."

"I know a place that will satisfy both our requirements," Kelly cut him off as gracefully as she could. "It's just up here on the right. Have you ever heard of the Zuni Café?"

"Nope, can't say that I have."

"It's got big T-bone steaks," she said enticingly.

"Say no more! Just show me where to park."

And soon they were sitting at a small table on the sidewalk outside the Zuni Café. Muldoon had with difficulty squeezed himself into one of the small wrought iron chairs and was now devouring his steak-and-baked with great gusto while Kelly picked daintily at her seafood salad.

"The food is great," Muldoon remarked. "But I wish their furniture was a little bigger. I feel like I'm sitting on a bucket."

"I'm sorry," returned Kelly. "I'd forgotten about the décor here." She smiled at him. "But I'm perfectly comfortable."

It was a fine day for November, sunny and warm, with very little wind. Muldoon had put on his wraparound black sunglasses which, along with his severe black suit and hulking demeanor, made him look very imposing indeed.

"For heaven's sake, take off those shades," she begged him. "They make you look like The Terminator or something."

"Yeah, aren't they great!" Muldoon responded as if to a compliment. "Watch this!" He stood up, looked around at the handful of occupied tables, and reached for the bulge of his shoulder holster, saying loudly in a bad German accent, "Do just as I say, and no vun gets hurt!"

There were several screams as most of the customers dived under their tables. Kelly watched his performance, at a loss for words, then looked off into the distance with a tight, I'm-not-with-him grin of embarrassment.

Muldoon sat down again and whipped off his shades, a satisfied smirk on his face until he noticed Kelly. "Hey, what's the matter?" he asked her in an injured tone. "Can't you people here take a joke anymore?"

The restaurant patrons gave him nervous looks as they slowly crawled out from underneath the tables. Then, seeing no further threats to their safety, they resumed their dining and the scene quickly returned to normal.

"Muldoon," hissed Kelly with an icy stare. "You really are the most impossible person I've ever met."

"Oh, come on, Kelly!" he thumped her on the back. "Loosen up! Have a little fun! Anyway, I'm glad I brought the shades. I almost didn't because I heard San Francisco was always cold and foggy. But this is a beautiful day, even for LA."

"You mean to tell me you've never been to San Francisco?"

"Well, not really," he admitted. "I've only come up here, I think, twice, just to make arrests. So, you know, it was just—zip—into town—zip—get into shootout—zip—bust the guy (if he was still alive) and—zip—back to LA. Never had a chance to pay attention to the weather. It's a shame, really, had a relative in town I kept meaning to look up... But this time I'm gonna make up for it. If I remember correctly Tanner also ordered you to show me the sights. It's gonna be at least a couple days before we get our ray guns," he made zapping sounds and hand motions at the people at the next table, causing them to flinch nervously. "So—show me the sights." He pushed his empty plate away and folded his arms with gastronomic content.

"Sure," she said. "Where do you want to go first?"

"I guess the usual." He contemplated the possibilities. "Golden Gate Park...Fisherman's Wharf...Pier 39...North Beach. But you can skip the Castro and Chinatown. I've had enough of Chinks and fags already to last me a lifetime."

"Is everyone in LA as bigoted as you are?" she asked, hiding her amusement at this remark.

"Probably," he replied. "But some people just don't have the balls to say what they really think. That's what all this PC stuff is really all about, isn't it? Encouraging people to be hypocrites, not to

say what they really think? You people in the Bay Area think you're all so sensitive and liberal just because you say 'Proud Chinese-American Heritage' when all the time you're thinking 'Chinks are almost okay once they learn how to be like *normal* Americans.'" His voice had become increasingly louder and, by the end of his speech, people at the adjoining tables were again looking at him strangely.

Kelly abruptly stood up. "Come on, Muldoon, you pay the check and let's get out of here. I'll take you to Sweet Inspirations for dessert. You like chocolate, don't you?"

"Now that's something we can definitely agree on!" He stood up and threw some money on the table. "Last one in the car buys."

And in a few minutes they had driven the several blocks up Market to Sweet Inspirations in the Castro and were sitting at a table near the window, eating their slices of double-fudge chocolate cake.

"Did you see the way that guy was looking at me?" he whispered to her, looking surreptitiously at the counterman who had been quite openly eyeing Muldoon up and down. "I'll bet he's a fag."

"I hate to break it to you," Kelly whispered back, "but since we're in the Castro now, you're probably right."

"Kelly!" He looked at her in distress. "I told you not to bring me here. Now what am I going to do?" He looked around furtively and whispered, "Is anybody looking at me?"

"Muldoon, you're six-foot four and weigh 275. Everybody's looking at you!"

He looked at her appreciatively, forgetting his nervousness for a moment. "Hey, that's pretty good. You guessed my height and weight exactly. Although," he looked down at his plate, "with a few more of these, it'll probably be 285. This is absolutely the best chocolate cake I ever ate."

"Didn't I tell you," said Kelly with pride. "I know my chocolate, and this is even better than the double-fudge brownies at Just Desserts." She looked at him more seriously. "But really, what is it with you and gay guys, anyway? They're not going to rape you, you know."

He looked down pensively at his plate of cake. "Oh, I don't know. I mean I intellectualize that they're just guys and have a right

to do what they want. But my gut feeling is...well...they just make my skin crawl, so let's leave it at that."

"But you're not married, and you don't have a girlfriend, right?" she persisted. "So that means that pretty much all your friends are guys."

"Yeah, but they're normal. You know, cops, guys in the Bureau. Real guy guys. Not like those...people." He gave a little shudder, then suddenly narrowed his eyes. "Hey, how do you know so much about me? First the height and weight and now the marital status. I don't think we've ever met. So what's the deal?"

She thought for a moment. "All right," she said finally. "If we're going to work together on this case, I guess you've got a right to know. You see," she took a deep breath, "well, the fact of the matter is," she lowered her gaze and mumbled, "I used to have, well, sort of a crush on you."

"What!" exclaimed Muldoon. "That's creepy! Are you kidding me? FBI agents don't have crushes, Kelly. Especially on each other! Hey—have you been stalking me or something?"

"Just please shut up and listen to someone else for once, will you, Muldoon?" said Kelly. "I mean, you've got something on me too, right? Where did all that 'dances with the fairies' come from, anyway?"

He shrugged. "Just something I heard at the office, I guess."

"Look, if you promise not to laugh at me, I'll tell you the whole story, OK?"

"Yeah, OK, sure." He leaned over and rested his chin on his hand. "I promise not to say a word."

"Well," she began. "It was when I was in college, about ten years ago. It was at the end of the seventies and I was just eighteen, a freshman. There was a group of older girls on campus, most of them seniors, maybe twenty, twenty-one. They seemed to be the hippest, most mysterious group on campus and I wanted badly to be part of them. Anyway, I found out their group was, well, sort of a Pagan thing. But that only made me more desperate to join them. Not just for their approval, you see, but I thought being older and all, they might actually have some special secret knowledge about the Old Ways. Well, every Samhain, they had their most important ritual.

They would dance naked around a fire in a secluded area of the woods near the campus. And on this particular Samhain I was invited to join them. Of course I was thrilled. But, wouldn't you know it, the campus cops showed up. We all started to run away, but I was the one who tripped and fell, so I was the only one they caught. When the cops asked me what I was doing out there, completely naked and dancing around, I blurted out the first excuse I could think of. 'It wasn't anything wrong, I was just dancing with the fairies.' Well, to make a long story short, they all had a good laugh, and I barely escaped getting suspended. But ever since I've been having to live that story down."

Muldoon tried to suppress a laugh, unsuccessfully. "Weeeird! But tell me, how'd you manage to overcome the disgrace and join the Bureau? And what does it have to do with your having some kind of a crush on me?"

"I'm getting to that," she replied. "Well, that experience really shook me up, and I eventually decided it was time to do something really serious with my life. Think back now. One of those arrests you were talking about, when you came up here to San Francisco, that was about ten years ago, wasn't it?"

He thought for a moment. "Yeah, maybe. So?"

"You're thirty-eight years old now, right? Ten years ago you were only twenty-eight, but the Bureau already regarded you as an agent on his way up. That first arrest put you in the public eye. You were in all the papers. You were a real personality. They called you things like 'Fearless' and 'Lone Wolf'."

"So get to the point."

"I cut out all those articles about you, even your picture in the Clarion. I guess I saw where all that mystical stuff was leading and I decided to go the other way. More level-headed, less emotional. So I idolized you. I kept a scrapbook about you. I researched you. I memorized everything about you. So—it was really you," she admitted painfully, "that inspired me to apply for the Bureau. It was the toughest thing I ever did, but I made it. When I got into the Bureau I kept following your career. Now here I am, ten years later, working on a case with you." Her voice became tinged with regret. "But even with all the little hints I've picked up through the years

about your mind and your attitude, I still was not prepared for you being so totally insensitive!" Suddenly Kelly began to weep.

Muldoon looked at her in open-mouthed astonishment, then handed her his paper napkin. She accepted it and blew her nose, wiped her eyes, and said nothing more.

"Kelly," he said finally. "Deanna. I'm really, truly sorry. I had no idea. Do you really find me that obnoxious?"

She gave him a thin smile. "No, not really, I guess. It's just that when you idolize someone, even though I admit it's totally irrational, it's still just so crushing to find out he's such an asshole. There," she blew her nose again. "I feel better now. I'm glad I got that off my chest." She sighed. "Of course it's not your fault. You are what you are, not what some teenage girl thought you were."

"Look," offered Muldoon, completely abashed, "sometimes I get a little carried away. And as for that 'dancing with the fairies' thing, I promise I won't mention it again. I won't even think about it. And as for that other thing, well, I guess it wouldn't hurt to tone it down a little. Like you said, people are what they are. Anyway, you know what you were asking me before? About guys? Well, not to change the subject, but I have a question for you. You're the one in charge of this operation. How long do you think it's going to take?"

"I don't know. Not long, I hope. Why?"

"Because it's only about two weeks till Thanksgiving, and I've got to get back to LA by then."

"Why, a family reunion?"

"No, nothing like that." He leaned forward and looked into her eyes. "You told me some personal stuff it took a lot of courage to tell. So now I'm going to tell you something I'll bet you don't know about me. On Thanksgiving I always invite the guys in the local field office, the ones without wives or girlfriends or families, to come to my place and spend the day with me. It can be a pretty lonely time of year if you don't have anybody, you know."

She regarded him with new interest. "Go on, tell me more."

"Well, like I said, they all come over to my place. I've got a nice apartment in a decent neighborhood. Four big rooms, great kitchen and, best of all, a big-screen TV. We watch the Macy's parade and the football games and make a day out of it. And here's the part I bet

you really don't know. I do all the cooking. I make chili and buffalo wings and real food like that. So, what do you think?" he finished, the pride evident in his voice.

She beamed at him. "Wow, you cook. I never knew that."

"You're the first person who knows about this outside of the guys. It's not something I'd like to get spread around. Deal?"

"Deal! You know, if you're interested, I've got an absolutely killer spaghetti sauce recipe."

"No kidding. With meat?"

"Sure, what do you think?"

"Deanna, listen. Maybe if this assignment is over by then...and if you're not doing anything special...you know, no boyfriend or family or anything...maybe you'd like to come to LA for Thanksgiving?"

"I'll see." Kelly laughed with delight. "But I just remembered—I don't know a thing about football!"

"No problem," he told her. "I'll tell you everything you need to know. You see, the game starts when one team kicks off to the other..."

"Kicks off what?" she asked innocently.

"The ball, Kelly, the ball!"

"Oh yes, of course! Go on."

And soon they were discussing recipes and football like the partners they had become.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

**P**hyl was pacing nervously back and forth in her tiny Tenderloin apartment, every now and then glaring at the telephone. After her talk with Violet, she had put in a call to her boss, Blair Brockman, Founding Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of the *Bay Weekly*.

Brockman never answered his home phone, although he lived alone. He would let the phone ring the requisite three rings, wait for the answering machine to pick it up, and then play back the

message a few minutes afterward. If he liked what he heard, he might even return the call.

He had been paranoid about answering the phone since that SLA business in the 70's. He had made the mistake of writing an editorial on the nobility of the Symbionese Liberation Army and the justness of its cause, going on at great length to defend their ideological right to kidnap newspaper heiress Patty Hearst, who he termed a "prisoner of war."

The SLA had liked his piece so much, that only a few hours after that particular issue of the *Weekly* hit the stands, he received a phone call from them, inviting him to join their cause. When he had demurred, the noble revolutionaries had told him in no uncertain terms to put up or shut up, as they had his home address and would be right over to convince him in person.

Brockman had panicked and called the police who, hot for any leads in the SLA kidnapping case, obligingly sent four police cars containing sixteen heavily-armed policemen, a paddy wagon, and a SWAT team to Brockman's quiet Noe Valley apartment at about eleven that night, making him so unpopular with his neighbors that he moved out of the building a few months later. The SLA never showed up, but Brockman installed the answering machine immediately upon moving into his new apartment about six blocks away, and declined to answer his phone thereafter.

Phyl's phone rang suddenly. As she snatched up the receiver and quickly put it to her ear, she heard a voice say, "Brockman here. What's the story?" ("What's the story?" was one of his favorite newspaper phrases. He thought it made him sound like a hard-bitten, underpaid reporter instead of a fat-cat publisher, which was closer to the truth.)

"Um, sir, I, uh, need to talk to you about that PG&E assignment."

"Great!" boomed Brockman. "What have you got? We'll nail their asses to the wall this time!"

Phyl summoned her courage. "I just got a hot tip, Chief, that's unrelated to the PG&E story. But it could prove to be a lot bigger."

"Bigger than getting the dirt on those PG&E rate gougers? I don't think so! I have it on good authority from one of my



unimpeachable sources that the Chairman of the Public Utilities Commission accepted a bribe from the CEO of PG&E to approve an illegal rate increase. All you have to do is to verify that story. You know, use your feminine wiles or whatever and get something good on tape, something we can use!”

“But Chief!” Phyl plowed ahead. “This tip I got is hot—really hot! It seems that there was a top-secret hush-hush meeting at Lawrence Livermore the other day...”

“Yeah, so what?” broke in Brockman. “Those bigwigs over there are always having top-secret meetings about one thing or another. And stop calling me Chief!”

“But the subject of this meeting, sir, was about some kind of scientific proof of alien activity in the Bay Area.”

“What do you mean ‘alien activity’? There’s swarms of them all over the Bay Area, in case you haven’t noticed. Probably most of them illegal. Those guys up there in the Berkeley Hills would be better off calling Immigration rather than having secret meetings about it.”

When Phyl could get a word in she explained, “No, I mean space aliens. Beings from another planet, that sort of thing.”

“What stupidity! You’ve got aliens on the brain, Dean! Didn’t we go through all this last week? You almost made us miss deadline! Although,” he said in a softer tone, “I must say you got us a pretty good story anyway. Devil worshippers, now that the public will buy. But space aliens? I don’t know if you’re aware of this, Dean, but our paper isn’t sold at the Safeway checkout counter.”

“Please, sir!” begged Phyl in desperation. “Look, starting tomorrow morning I’ve still got two days left. Let me spend just half a day on this alien story. If I can’t get anything juicy, I promise I’ll go jump into bed with PG&E!”

“All right, all right!” he replied. “I can see your mind’s made up. Go do what you have to do. Just two things!” A note of menace crept into his voice. “One, come up with a front-page story. Something that’ll knock my socks off. And two, I want this terrific story filed with Lyle, in its entirety, by Friday night. Got that?”

"I got it, Chief!" Phyl exclaimed, hanging up the phone. As she did so she could faintly hear Brockman screaming, "And don't call me Chief!"

She pumped her fist in the air with excitement, almost destroying the light fixture on the low ceiling in the process.

"Yes!" she exulted.

That same evening there was a knock at the door of Simona's room at The Madhouse. "Phone for you, Simona," said a voice.

"I'm drying my hair," she snapped. "Take a message."

"It's some guy named Tim," persisted the voice, "he says it's urgent."

"Tim! Gangway!" She flung open the door, almost flattening a surprised Bear. He watched in amusement as she ran barefoot down the hall, wet hair and robe billowing out behind her.

When she reached the phone, she grabbed up the receiver. "This better be good," she panted into the mouthpiece.

"Simona?" said a contrite voice. "I'm calling to apologize for yesterday. I didn't mean anything by what I said. Can I come over and talk?"

Make him suffer, she thought to herself. Into the phone she said in a haughty manner, "I'm not dressed, Tim. And besides, I think it would be better if we didn't see each other for a while."

"Aw, Simona," he pleaded. "Don't talk like that. I really need to see you. Maybe you could get dressed and come over here? Whenever you get ready is okay."

"Me, come over there? To your place? I'm surprised it hasn't been condemned by the Health Department!"

"I know, I know, I'm not much of a housekeeper. But I spent all day today cleaning up. I even put fresh sheets on the bed. So what do you say? Please, please come over here tonight? Just for a little while. I don't expect anything from you."

He sounded so dejected that Simona could scarcely keep from breaking her resolve. When she spoke her voice was icy. "You mean you didn't go to work again today? They're going to fire you, and then where will you be?"

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about," he replied. There was a brief silence.

"Oh, all right! See you in an hour!" She hung up the phone before he could say anything further and dashed back to her room. Bear was leaning against the wall near the staircase, humming "Breaking Up Is Hard to Do."

"Oh, shut up," she told him, slamming her door shut with a vengeance.

"Temper, temper." Bear grinned and went down the stairs, still humming.

Simona quickly dried her hair with one hand, while with the other she rummaged through her closet, looking for a flattering, but non-professional, outfit. She finally settled on a lacy, low-cut red blouse and a tight, mid-thigh length black skirt, black sheer pantyhose and red heels.

Then she hurried downstairs and banged on Rick and Wanda's door. When Wanda opened the door she was dressed in robe and slippers.

"Oh hi, Simona," she said, yawning. "I was just watching a TV movie and I guess I must have nodded out. I think it's over now." Her eyes focused and she finally noticed Simona's attire. "Hey, you look great! You going somewhere?"

"Where's Rick?" Simona asked, looking around the room. "I need him to drive me over to Tim's place."

"Oh, he's probably still down in the workshop, working on that stupid yuppie sculpture stuff. He's been down there most of the time ever since he and Al pulled that scam at the bar. But you're going to Tim's place?" She brightened. "You two made it up then?"

"We'll see about that!" answered Simona, scowling. "I just don't know what's going on with him lately. He's been so moody."

"Oh, honey, you know what men are like," Wanda sighed.

"Do I ever! Sometimes I wonder why I bother."

They looked at each other and said in unison, "Men! Can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em!" Then they both laughed.

"OK, then, good luck!" Wanda yawned again and closed the door.

Simona went downstairs to the basement and opened the workshop door. "Rick! You down here?" she called out, squinting in the dim and dusty light.

"That you, Simona?" answered a muffled voice. "Just putting my tools away." He emerged from the tool closet. "I was just about to knock off for the day. What time is it, anyway?" He was standing beside a long table littered with several half-finished plaster busts. Under the light of the bare ceiling bulb he almost appeared to be a plaster figure himself, covered as he was from head to foot with fine, white dust. He self-consciously began to brush himself off. "Wow," he remarked. "I'd forgotten how much this stuff sticks to you. I better go upstairs and clean up."

"No time for that," Simona told him briskly. "It's after ten now, and I told Tim I'd see him in an hour. Please drive me there?"

"Aw, Simona, I can't go out looking like this," he protested.

"Sure you can. You'll be in the van all the time. Fifteen minutes to take me there, five minutes to wait for me to see what he wants, and fifteen minutes for us to get back. In no time at all you'll be taking a nice hot shower. Remember where the place is?"

"Over on South Van Ness, right?" he replied, scratching his head and sending a shower of plaster dust into the air. "I guess you two made it up, then."

"That's what I'm going to find out. He called me about half an hour ago sounding very apologetic. But you know Tim," she shook her head sadly, "he could be drunk again by the time I get there."

"I hope not, for your sake," he said as they began climbing the stairs together. "Yeah, sure, I'll drive you," he muttered. "Anything for love, I guess. But you better sit in the back. You don't want plaster dust on your nice clothes. Damn," he said to himself. "Now I'm gonna have to vacuum out the front seat when I get back. Work, work, work!"

"Poor baby," cooed Simona. "Cheer up, it could be worse. You could have a real job."

"Yeah," he said, brightening up a bit as they went out the rear entrance to where the van was parked. "Anything but that nine-to-five stuff."

In less than fifteen minutes Simona was knocking on the door of Tim's cottage on South Van Ness. In a few seconds he opened the door, resplendent in a dark business suit, complete with white dress shirt with button-down collar and conservative necktie. He had shaved closely, eliminating all traces of his usual careless stubble. A neatly-trimmed mustache and hair recently cut to a more conventional length completed the picture.

"Well," he said, grinning and opening his arms wide. "What do you think?" He turned slowly around in a circle like a fashion model.

Simona gasped and said, "Who are you and what have you done with Tim Stuckey?" She pushed past him and looked around at the recently-cleaned living room. "This can't even be the right place. What's the address here?"

"Oh, come off it, Simona," laughed Tim. "It can't be that much of a shock to see me looking respectable for once. But seriously, what do you think?"

She sat down in an overstuffed chair. "What do I think? I think I want to know what's going on with you. I've never seen you in a suit and tie except at weddings and funerals. And what's with the corporate haircut?"

Tim removed his jacket and sat down on the couch across from her chair. "I've been doing a lot of thinking in the past twenty-four hours. Stuff about you and me, and where I'm going, and where we're going. I mean look at me." He stood up and walked to the kitchen, returning shortly with two Calistogas. He gave one to Simona. "Oh, by the way, this is my new drink from now on. On weekends, I'll celebrate with the citrus flavors. Really go wild. But as I was saying," he sat down on the couch again. "Look at me. I'm thirty-two years old and what am I? An alcoholic, part-time messenger boy and a half-assed lighting designer who only gets jobs because I know everybody in the theater community. And half the time, as you've pointed out on many occasions, I don't even get paid, except for being invited to opening and closing night parties where I end up drinking too much cheap wine and making lots of useless 'contacts'. So, in conclusion," he said as if he had been making a formal speech, "I have decided to change my life. I did get a BA, you know, back there somewhere in the mists of time.

Tomorrow I'm going to fake up a resume and hit every corporation in town. Someone's bound to hire me, and I'll take whatever they offer. Even support staff. Even mail room. And in my spare time, evenings and weekends, I can still do theater, and I'll be more relaxed about it, because I won't be depending on the miserable few bucks they deign to pay me. Or don't. Either way, I figured out that the main reason I drink too much is because of financial anxiety, and I'm finally going to eliminate that. And so," he rose and went down on his knees in front of Simona's chair, "if things go well for me," he took her hand, "maybe we could talk about the future. Our future." As he said this he got up again, went back to the couch and sat down with the air of a man who has said all there is to say.

Simona silently considered all that he had said. "Well," she said after a time, shaking her head. "I'm obviously going to have to think about all this, long and hard. But for now, let's just see how it goes. You know, like they say on that TV show, 'One day at a time'."

She stood up and started pacing around the room. "If you can get a real job, and if you can work in enough time for the theater (because I know you'd never be really happy without it), then we'll just take it from there." She stopped in front of him and took his face in her hands. "Mmm," she purred. "Smooth!" She released him but continued to stand over him, looking at him intently. "I guess I forgive you." Her stern voice belied her words. "Look, Tim, thank you for the fine speech and everything. I know you mean well, but I also know you're really just doing this for me, and it makes me feel kind of guilty. But there is," she held up a forefinger, "an alternative."

She sat down beside him on the couch and squeezed his hand. "Don't sell yourself short. You're a pretty damn decent lighting designer, one of the best in the Bay Area." She gave a rueful laugh. "At least, you are when you're sober. If all this," she pulled on his necktie and ruffled his hair, "doesn't work out. And I'm not doubting your ability or your resolve, but things happen." She shrugged her shoulders. "Look, you and I both know that the Bay Area theater scene these days is shit. The money's not there and the productions, for the most part, are pretty boring. Too much PC and not enough courage and creativity, if you ask me. The days of a new Sam Shepard play at the Magic every season are long gone. But, and I

repeat, if for any reason your straight job doesn't work out, we can always," she hesitated a bit, "go to New York."

Tim had been listening to her attentively. Now he exclaimed, "New York! I don't know about that. They say it's really tough to break into the scene there."

"Sure," she told him, "anything worth doing is tough in the beginning. But getting a straight job and keeping it, for a man of your temperament, won't be any easier. I took a trip to New York a few months ago, and it's great! Good theater, lots of work, even designers and technicians are treated like human beings, not just flunkies. And the pay is really good, too, especially compared to here. And if you design and run your own shows, you get the flat fee up front and a weekly salary for as long as the show runs. Which is usually much longer than the four-to-six week runs you get here. You might not even need a part-time job."

"Hey," said Tim suspiciously, "how come you know so much about the New York theater scene? I thought you were just a 'naïve little girl from Minneapolis'."

"Yeah, and my father runs a Chinese restaurant there," she shot back, "but that doesn't mean I don't know anything about the big city. I'm not provincial, or ignorant, and don't you forget it!"

He held out his arms to her. "Aw, you know I was just kidding about that Minneapolis stuff."

"Sure, I know," she replied, relaxing. "But you of all people should know I'm sensitive about it."

"Yeah, I know. My father was a used-car salesman in Des Moines, and I don't go out of my way to spread that around either. But seriously, how do you know all this?"

"Silly, I've got some friends who happen to be in the New York theater scene. I stayed with them when I went out there last summer. They're cabaret performers, a husband-and-wife team, so don't get jealous, OK? Anyway, the husband's gay. But I believe them when they say that compared to the West Coast, New York is a theater workers paradise."

"Well," he considered this. "I guess, like you said, let's see how it goes. But I must admit, it does sound great. And you'd come with me?"

“Sure, why not? The stuff I do, I can do in any big city. And since I wouldn’t be half-supporting you and we could live together and pay one rent, I wouldn’t have to work so much anyway.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Tim agreed. “But maybe in the spring when it gets warmer there. I’ve heard that New York winters are as cold as a bitch.”

“That reminds me,” said Simona, unbuttoning the top button on her already low-cut blouse. “You haven’t even commented on my new outfit. And I wore it just for you.” She pouted and turned her head away.

‘Oh, Simona, you know you always look good enough to eat. Which reminds me.” He went over to a small desk and took out his billfold. He extracted a single bill and said, “African-American Rep came through with that twenty-buck consulting fee they’ve owed me since September. So I’ve got just enough to order a large pizza and some Häagen Daz. How about it? I’ll let you choose the ice cream. And I think Casablanca’s on the Late Show tonight.”

She kicked off her heels and curled up on the couch. “Sounds like a plan,” she echoed him. “Play it, Sam!”

Tim went over to the sofa and stood behind her, crooning, “ ‘You must remember this’...”

“ ‘A kiss is still a kiss’...” she sang softly back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“**W**ow,” said Phyl in astonishment. “I can’t believe some of the names on this list!” She was sitting on the bed in Violet’s room at The Madhouse. It was only a little after 9:00 in the morning, but Rosa had been as good as her word, and the FedEx envelope had arrived nearly an hour ago. Rosa had thoughtfully charged the \$30 delivery fee to the Lawrence Livermore account.

“Yeah,” Violet agreed. “It must have been a top-level conference all right. Representatives from the Pentagon, the FBI, all the Bay Area police departments. They don’t pay attention to the normal UFO sightings. This must be really big.”



"I'd give anything for a taped transcript. But don't get me wrong, Violet, I'm really grateful to you for letting me in on this."

"What are sisters for? But I knew that with your interest in the occult and your position at the paper, you'd be the perfect person to find out the truth about this. Are there aliens in the Bay Area?" she wondered aloud. "And if there are, you'd think someone would have noticed. This may be a weird place, but it's not that weird."

"Well," said Phyl, looking at the list again. "I'd better start doing some digging, but I don't have much time. Just today and tomorrow to get this story. Otherwise I have to seduce some guy at PG&E again. I promised Brockman." She checked out the names on the list. "Hmmm, let's see, these Federal guys will already have flown back to Washington. The local police are always hopeless. Wait a minute, who's this Auslander guy? All it says here is that he's a science-type guy. Chairperson of the Physics Department at UC Berkeley." She got up and started walking around the room, concentrating intently. "Now what would an academic guy like that be doing at a conference with all these military and law enforcement types? I've got it!" She snapped her fingers and turned to face Violet. "He's a UC employee, the meeting was at Lawrence Livermore which is associated with the university. Therefore, the meeting must have concerned some sort of research project or something he's been doing. I'll bet he might even have asked for the meeting in the first place. So he's where I'll start."

"Brilliant, Phyl." Violet was already beginning to think about other, more spiritual matters. "Let me know what happens."

"Sure will." She moved toward the door. "Right now, I'm headed for Berkeley."

She went softly down the stairs and out a side door. Once on the street she quickly hailed a cab and went back to her place where she packed a shoulder bag with the necessary audio and video equipment. Within half an hour she was on a BART train to Berkeley. As it sped east through the TransBay tube, she rehearsed her approach.

Upon arriving in downtown Berkeley, she walked the few hundred yards to the UC campus. After locating the building that housed the Physics Department, she went directly to Dr. Auslander's

office. A gray-haired motherly-looking woman was sitting behind a desk in the reception area slowly keying data into a computer. As Phyl entered the office, the woman looked up with a bored expression and said, "Yes, may I help you?"

"I'm Dr. Smith from the SF State Exo-Biology Department," Phyl replied smoothly and without hesitation. "I'm here to see Dr. Auslander. He wanted to consult with me relative to Monday's meeting."

"Monday's meeting, you say?" She raised her eyebrows slightly. "Dear me, I wish I'd been here for that one, but unfortunately I'm only part-time. Nothing like that ever happens when I'm here," she sighed. "You say you're from SF State?" she frowned. "I didn't even know they had an Exo-Biology Department."

"Um, it's new this year. Is Dr. Auslander in?"

"My goodness no," exclaimed the receptionist. "This is his teaching day. He's got classes until four o'clock this afternoon. But if you really need to contact him," she lowered her voice and leaned over the desk closer to Phyl, "on his teaching days he always eats lunch at the Bear's Lair," she looked at her watch, "at about one o'clock. He says he likes to watch the students," she whispered, "his way of slumming, I guess. Once a week he insists on eating bad food and drinking cheap beer out of a plastic cup." She straightened up and resumed her data entry, saying philosophically, "Ah, but who can understand the German mind?"

"Thank you, Ms. Burton," said Phyl, reading her name tag. "You've been a great help." She started towards the door.

"Exo-Biology must be a fascinating profession," Ms. Burton said, looking off into space for a moment. Then she shook her head and focused on her computer screen. "Ah well, it's back to data entry for me." She sighed and continued her typing as Phyl left the office.

Unexpectedly finding that she had at least a couple of hours to kill, she leisurely made her way over to the university library. It was a cold, drizzly, mid-November day, and although it was a Thursday morning with school in full session, she encountered few students on her way. Those that she did passed her by quickly, taking little notice of the tall, red-haired young woman clad in black leather.

At the library she thoroughly researched her subject. Dr. Auslander, it seemed, was something of a mystery man. Although he was nearly sixty-five years old, there was no mention in the university bio of his life before being admitted to the graduate studies program in the early 50s. There he had distinguished himself and advanced quickly, earning his doctorate in 1956. He became a UC professor that same year, filling a vacancy caused by the sudden death of one of the Physics faculty members, and he had taught here ever since, rising to become chairperson of his department by the late 70's. He had published many scientific papers and won many minor prizes for his research projects. There the official bio ended.

Phyl closed the book and looked at her watch. Nearly 1:00. She hurried over to the Bear's Lair, a cheap burger-and-beer student hangout near the Sather Gate and Telegraph Avenue. By the time she got there, it was after one and the place was crowded with students, all laughing and talking to each other, munching on sandwiches and guzzling beer even though it was only the middle of the day. She had studied a photo of Auslander in the library and began looking for his bald head, finally spying it at a table in the far corner of the room. It was attached to a rather small body wearing a rumpled white lab coat.

Removing her leather jacket and unbuttoning the top button of her blouse, she advanced toward her prey. "Dr. Auslander," she called to him in her best awed college-girl voice. "Is this seat taken?" Without waiting for an answer she sat down directly across from him in the only other seat at the small table.

Auslander raised his head from the journal he had been reading and removed his glasses. "Do I know you, my dear?" he asked, steadily regarding her cleavage.

"I doubt it, Professor," she replied with a winning smile. "I'm Stacey. I'm a junior here and I'm doing a research project on, you know, the possibility of life on other planets. I mean, in a strictly scientific way, you know?"

He looked into her eyes and said, "Tell me about this project of yours, Stacey, and what I can do to help."

"Gosh," she pouted prettily. "I guess I'm just having a real problem trying to figure out where to start. And this darn paper's due in only two weeks. I need, well, some kind of approach that sounds, you know, scientific." She toyed nervously with her blouse and gave him a big smile. "People say that you're very kind and helpful to serious students like me. I'd give anything, Professor, if you could help me with my...project."

Auslander stood up suddenly and looked at his watch. "It's nearly one-thirty now, and my next class is not until two-thirty. I have an hour to spare, and I would be more than happy to help you with your little...project. So, my dear, why don't you accompany me back to my private office. There we can talk more comfortably, and I can satisfy your questions on any subject that may arise. I assure you that we won't be disturbed."

"This is really so nice of you!" breathed Phyl, taking his arm and giving it a little squeeze. "Like, I've got so many questions, you know?"

"Yes, my dear," said Dr. Auslander, patting her hand as they left the Bear's Lair. "Believe me, I know!"

The following Sunday, more than a week after the coming of Al, Wanda was walking up Haight Street toward Golden Gate Park. She knew this six-block stretch of Haight like the back of her hand, from Central on the East to where it ended at Stanyan on the west and became an entrance to the Park. When she had been heavy into drugs, about three years earlier, she had known every shop and store, every bar and restaurant, from hippie to hip. During that time she had lived mostly on the street in the company of many other unfortunates of her age and persuasion. That was before Rick had rescued her from the clutches of the street and crack cocaine. Though she was grateful to him and he had become her best friend, she found she missed the easy camaraderie of the street, her old friends, and the casual sharing of a bottle of wine or a joint.

As she walked up the street on this chilly November Sunday, she thought about the way her life had gone since arriving in San Francisco nearly four years ago. She was now twenty-two. Most of her friends from back home, a small Kansas town, would be

graduating from college by now, armed with information and documentation which would ensure their places in consumerist America. And she—she was living in perhaps the City's last working commune with a gay hippie artist who was already pushing forty.

She did not regret being off the drugs—she found she was thinking more clearly now than at any time since graduating from high school. She did not regret her free-and-easy life as Rick's platonic "old lady". He paid the rent on their room at The Madhouse with the infrequent sales of his sculpture and his "unemployment checks" which seemed to come at odd times. (She wondered about the source of these checks, as she hadn't seen him work a day at a straight job since she had known him.) He usually could even come up with enough pocket money for the occasional burrito and beer. But she was beginning to feel the effects of too much time on her hands, too much drifting through life, her "job" as baker for The Madhouse notwithstanding. She didn't want a straight job exactly, but she wanted something to do, something out in the world that would make her feel less like a kept woman on the one hand, or a housewife on the other. She knew, however, that with her high-school education and job experience (she had quit after working half a day at a coffee shop on Polk Street two years ago) that she had few prospects. So it was either college, which daunted her, or the McFood industry, which horrified her.

As she walked along, turning these thoughts idly over in her mind, voices began to call out to her from under old blankets and ponchos, huddled in the doorways of closed shops to fend off the chill and the damp.

"Hey, Wanda," the sing-song litany greeted her, "how's it goin'? What's happenin'? Got any spare change?"

"Hey, Toad," she replied, giving each voice a name. "Hey, Star! What's new, Blue? Lookin' good, Magic Man. Sorry, guys, I'm tapped."

"No prob," they chorused. "Have a good one. Stay cool!"

"Catch you all later," she waved and continued on her way. As she did so, she thought, for perhaps the hundredth time in the past ten days, of Al. "What a guy," she sighed to herself. "If I could find a guy like that," she continued dreamily, "who felt the same way about

me, I'd move in with him in a minute. Rick's okay, in his way, but think of it! Wild sex and romance, too! Hell, I might even think about getting married! And if he had a good job," she went over the qualifications, "and plenty of money, and he wouldn't mind settling down, and he didn't do drugs or drink too much, maybe we could even have babies!" She sighed again. "I think I'd like that."

She finally reached the end of Haight where it was crossed by Stanyan. A huge McDonald's was on her left and an even huger Cala supermarket was on her right. As always, there was a crowd of people hanging around both places. Wanda joined the Cala crowd who were more her kind of people than the fast-food addicts across the street.

She had been there for only a few minutes when she was approached by a middle-aged man with a full gray beard and short black hair covered by a multi-colored knit Jamaican cap.

"Wanda," he greeted her in surprise. "How the hell are you? Haven't seen you on the street in months!"

"Hey, Uncle Joe," returned Wanda as soon as she recognized him. "It has been a long time. Where you been keepin' yourself?"

"Oh, here and there. You know how it is," he replied. He looked at her furtively and glanced to his right and left. "Like, uh, could you do me a favor?" he asked in a low voice.

"Sure, I guess. I'm not doin' anything at the moment."

"Just watch my backpack for a few minutes, would you? I've got a, uh, kind of a business meeting with somebody across the street." He jerked his head toward McDonald's. "You know what I mean."

"Sure, Uncle Joe, take your time. I'll be right here."

He handed her the small backpack. "Great!" he told her. "Be back in a flash!"

She slung his backpack carelessly over her shoulder and sat down against the wall where five or six people were passing around a bottle of cheap wine. One guy lit up a joint and began to pass it around in the same manner. It's good to be home, thought Wanda, accepting the joint and taking a deep drag.

"Damn it, Bill, I don't see why we have to be out here on foot in this weather! Why couldn't we take the squad car?" Patrolman Jack

Milton was trudging up Haight street with his partner, Sergeant Bill Blake. Milton was short and wiry and of a high-strung disposition, given to frequent nervous tics and, in spite of the cold drizzle, was sweating profusely. Blake was a large, beefy black man with a stolid but dour nature. In his hand he held a strange-looking device which looked like a cross between a child's toy ray gun and a radiation detecting device.

"Now, Milton, you know we've got to point this thing at everybody we come into contact with. We can't do that in a car. I don't know why the Captain picked us for this stupid assignment, and I don't like it any better than you do. So just quit your bitchin'. Son of a gun, but my feet hurt!"

Sensing that his partner was perhaps not in the best of moods, Milton wisely shut up. In silence they plodded up Haight toward the Park. As they neared the Cala supermarket, Milton sniffed the air suspiciously. "Hey, do you smell what I smell?"

"Yeah, Milton, I smell it. This being the Haight Ashbury I'd be surprised if I didn't smell it. Prob'ly just some kids blowin' a J. Ain't no federal crime."

"Come on, Sarge," Milton pleaded. "Look at those hippies over there. It looks like they're also drinking in public. That's two offenses. Come on, let's go bust their asses!"

"All right," agreed Blake amiably. "I know you're bored. We'll just slowly walk over there in full uniform, point these devices at every one and make sure they're not aliens." He suppressed a chuckle. "If any of them are stupid enough to still be hanging around, smoking and drinking, you can bust them. That okay with you?"

"Gee thanks, Sarge," said Milton, advancing stealthily toward the group.

"Shit, it's the cops!" exclaimed the guy sitting next to Wanda, handing her the remains of the joint. Before Milton had gotten to within ten feet of them, everyone had split except for Wanda. She hurriedly stubbed out the roach and popped it into her mouth and swallowed quickly.

By this time Milton was swaggering up to Wanda with his right hand on his holstered gun. "What are you doing out here all alone, little girl?" he asked her with a leer.

“Just waiting for a friend, officer,” replied Wanda in a bright and cheerful manner.

Milton sniffed the air again and looked around. Seeing no evidence, he said in a threatening voice, “We have reason to believe that you, or one of your buddies, was just using illegal narcotics, not to mention drinking alcoholic beverages in public.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that officer,” she told him as politely as she could manage.

“We’ll just see about that,” Milton retorted, his fingers beginning to twitch nervously. “Open that backpack!”

“Come on, Milton, leave her be!” called out Blake, who had been pointing his device at everybody in the vicinity, much to their amusement.

Wanda shrugged and handed the backpack to Milton who, ignoring his partner, began to rummage quickly through it. “Aha!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “What have we here?” He held up a large plastic baggie full of white powder.

Wanda turned pale. “B-but,” she stammered, “that—that’s not even my pack. I’m just holding it for a friend.”

“Sure you are! And just where is this ‘friend’ of yours?”

Wanda looked desperately across the street toward McDonald’s. Uncle Joe was nowhere to be seen.

Milton opened the baggie and touched some of the powder with his forefinger and then put it to his tongue. “Just as I thought. Tastes like the pure stuff to me.”

“I swear,” cried Wanda in panic, “I don’t know anything about this!”

Blake addressed her sadly, quietly. “I’m afraid my partner’s right.” He took the baggie from Milton and put it carefully into his coat pocket. “We can’t let something like this slide. Milton, cuff her, read her her rights and call for a squad car.”

Milton took great pleasure in following Blake’s order. Within minutes Wanda was bundled into the back seat of the car, handcuffed, and in a state of shock.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Upon leaving Dr. Auslander's office, Phyl immediately did two things: First, she straightened her clothing which had become disheveled and undone during her amatory struggles with the good doctor (that old boy is sure strong for his age, she thought). Second, she headed straight for the nearest bar, ordered a double scotch straight up, and went to a secluded back booth, collecting her thoughts and letting the fiery liquid trickle down her grateful throat, providing much-needed warmth to her body and clarity to her mind.

She went back over the events of the previous hour. She had succeeded in arousing Auslander—a feat that proved to be much easier than she would have thought—to the point where he would tell her anything, and did. The only problem was that her tape recording of the session contained, in equal parts, ravings about his great “discovery” and propositions to Phyl for various sex acts too kinky to contemplate. At one point he had even offered to cancel his classes for the rest of the afternoon and take her to his “pleasure dungeon” which seemed to be located in the basement of his home in the Berkeley Hills. When she had politely declined, he had decided to force the issue; hence the condition of her clothing. As journalistic evidence of anything beyond Auslander's sexual proclivities, however, the recording was worthless. But between the ravings and the seduction attempts, Phyl had managed to piece together the whole story: how he had invented his fantastic device for distinguishing the common patterns inherent in all human brain waves; his realization of the practical application for this device (any brain waves not fitting this pattern must be not of human origin); the installation of this device in the huge telescope tower at the observatory with the intention of scanning the skies in the search for intelligent alien life; the technician's mistake which had resulted in the aiming of the device not at the skies but at the Bay Area itself; and finally, the exhilarating but disconcerting discovery of consistently positive readings.

Upon verifying these readings, he had told her, he had gone to Dr. Whitman who was the head of the Lawrence Livermore

Research Facility and told him all. Dr. Whitman had then called for the infamous Monday morning meeting. The rest, thanks to Violet, Phyl knew.

But what to do? How could she use perhaps the most startling discovery of the century and turn it into a believable newspaper story? She could see the headline now: “Space Aliens in Bay Area, Claims Noted Prize-Winning Physicist.” Auslander would deny the whole thing and she would look like a fool and probably lose her job. That is, if Brockman consented to even print the story in the first place.

Phyl walked up to the bar and ordered another double. As she went back to her booth, her thoughts were going a mile a minute. “Think, Phyl!” she commanded herself. “This story is too good to pass up. But what can I do with it?”

At times like this, she always thought of what her old logic professor in college had taught her. “Okay,” she said to herself, brow furrowed in concentration. “We have a working hypothesis—aliens in the Bay Area. We have evidence: Auslander’s discovery, apparently valid enough to be taken seriously by the University and some very important government officials as well. What will they do? Try to find the aliens, of course. As long as the big device registers positive, the officials will use the little devices to try to spot an individual alien.

“But what does the science of logic tell us? That by sound deductive reasoning you can come to a valid conclusion even without the necessity of empirical evidence. I will never get to use one of those alien-spotting devices. So I must reason it out. I must find the alien another way.”

Elated and proud of herself for her brilliant reasoning, she quickly downed her second double scotch and exited the bar, in the process being hit on by two burly truck drivers and a lonely grad student.

Returning to San Francisco on the crowded rush-hour BART train, she found a seat next to an elderly Chinese woman who was chattering to her companion in that language. As her mind began to emerge from its light alcoholic haze, and as her thoughts were undisturbed by the unintelligible conversation next to her, she found herself able to think even more clearly. The best way to find the alien

was to try to recall any unusual activity she had heard of, or noticed, since the alien signals first began. Let's see, she thought, according to Auslander they had been going on since about last Friday, just about a week ago now. What had happened that was unusual during that time? Unbidden, she noticed her thoughts focusing on "Her Night of Terror, Etc." She thought of the three weird guys, of the bonfire in the center of that glowing green circle. She had assumed later that it had been somehow part of their ritual. But, as she probed deeper into her memory, she clearly recalled asking them what it was, and that they had denied any knowledge of it. She had glossed over that at the time, having had other things on her mind, but now it seemed peculiar.

That set her thinking about the mysterious voice in her head. What had it said? "I don't know this Devil. Picture it for me." And no sooner had she done so than a glowing image, almost identical to what she had pictured in her mind, had appeared in the center of the bonfire, speaking and commanding the three erstwhile Devil worshippers to sacrifice one of their number. After which they had all, Phyl included, run out of the park in terror.

This in turn made her, for some reason, start thinking about Al. She remembered that she had been fantasizing about him just before she heard the voice in her head. And she also remembered that just before she had gone to the Park—ironically looking for evidence of UFO's—that she had been in The Last Resort. She had just met Al, who had just started working there that night, and who was extremely vague about who he was and where he had come from, but who, seemingly overnight, had managed to transform The Last Resort from just another seedy downtown dive into a chic nightclub for the young and trendy. Could there be a connection?

By this time she had arrived in San Francisco. She looked at her watch. Almost 6:30. She decided to get off the train at the Montgomery Street station downtown and walk the six or so blocks down to The Last Resort. She would nonchalantly strike up a conversation with Al, hoping to get some kind of response from him that would serve to confirm or refute her theory. She felt instinctively that her sexual innuendoes wouldn't work on him, but she had other methods.

When she arrived at the bar, shortly before seven, she found the steel security door firmly locked and bearing a sign which read, "The Last Resort—Your First Resort for Fabulous Drinks, Fabulous Music and Fabulous People—Hours 8PM to 2AM—7 Days a Week".

"Shit!" she exclaimed. "I don't want to wait a whole hour! Besides, this place is so damn popular now that by then it'll be crawling with people and I'll have no chance to talk to Al alone."

She went around to the side of the bar to the little alley in the rear, in the process nearly tripping over a shapeless bundle of blankets on the sidewalk near the rear entrance.

"Hey, watch where you're going, missy!" said a peevish voice partly muffled by the blankets.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" said Phyl with surprise, quickly stepping aside.

An old woman slowly emerged from the pile of blankets and asked her, "What are you doin' back here anyway?" She glanced at the leaden sky which was not yet completely dark. "You're way too early for the healin'. And from the looks of you, you don't need it anyway!"

"Healing?" said Phyl in a puzzled tone. "I don't know anything about any healing. I just need to talk to the bartender if he's in there. You know him?"

"Who, you mean Al?" She chuckled to herself. "Everybody knows Al. Everybody wants to see Al. But what the hell do you want from him?" She said this in a rather accusatory manner, and Phyl flinched in spite of herself.

She thought quickly and decided to more or less tell this formidable old woman the truth. "Uh, I'm a reporter from the *Bay Weekly*," she said with a pleasant smile. "The owner of this place, Mister, ah..."

"You must be talkin' about Duckworth. Well, go on, then."

"Well, he wanted me to do a publicity piece on the bar. So, since I had some time, I thought I'd come down and interview that new bartender. Maybe take some pictures. But the place is closed."

"Ha!" The old lady spat on the sidewalk and shook her head. "Well, I don't know," she allowed. "But I guess if Duckworth knows

about it, it must be okay. So,” she grinned and held out her hand, “I guess maybe I could help you out.”

Phyl, recognizing the ancient symbol of *quid pro quo*, quickly dug into her pocket and put a five-dollar bill onto the old lady’s outstretched hand.

“Thanks, missy, you ain’t such a bad sort after all.” She immediately stuffed the bill into a pocket of her voluminous overcoat. “Watch this!” She went over and banged on the window near the rear entrance to the bar. “Al!” she cried out in a loud imperious voice. “Open up! It’s me, Marjorie!”

In a few minutes the little window opened and a head looked out. “Marjorie, I’m busy!” exclaimed Al with some irritation. “I distinctly told you—not till three! Now if you’ll excuse me...”

“Hold on, Al, don’t go off in a snit!” she interrupted before Al could close the window. “There’s a young lady out here wants to see you, says she’s a reporter or something.” She turned to Phyl. “What did you say your name was, missy?”

“Phyl—Phyllis Dean,” she replied.

“Says her name’s Phyllis Dean!” Marjorie yelled unnecessarily to Al, who still had his head out the window and was only a few feet away from them.

“Yes, yes,” returned Al with some impatience. “I heard. Ms. Dean, the bar doesn’t open until eight. Come back then and I’ll buy you a drink.” He pulled back his head and began to close the window.

“Al, wait!” said Phyl quickly, hurrying up to the window. “I need to talk to you. I need your help.”

Al considered this for a moment. “All right,” he said finally, closing the window and then unlocking the back door. “Come in and tell me what I can do for you.”

Phyl entered somewhat hesitantly, unsure as to how to proceed.

“Please have a seat,” said Al, indicating the cot. He perched on a stool directly across from her and repeated, “So, what can I do for you?”

She noticed that he was looking steadily and intently into her eyes. Wilting slightly under his gaze, she managed to stammer, "I—I'm working on a story, and—and I want to get your opinion of it."

"But why me?" Al asked in a disinterested tone. "I'm not a journalist. And I haven't been here long enough to comment on the veracity of your information."

"That's it, that's it exactly!" cried Phyl, suddenly finding a plausible line of questioning. "You remember when I was here the other night? With Mr. Brockman? And he told me to do a lifestyle story on you and the bar?"

"Yes. And I recall you said that wasn't your field. You were quite upset by his request, as I remember."

"Right. But I thought it over and decided it would make a fascinating story. The angle is, it's not so much a lifestyle story as it is a story about you. You know, your life, rags to riches, that sort of thing. Picture this: Young, handsome, mysterious guy comes to San Francisco, talks his way into a job at a seedy bar, and in no time transforms it into a trendy nightclub hotspot. I want to do an in-depth interview, take some pictures, you know..." She spread her hands and gave him a big smile.

"I'm afraid that would not be advisable, Ms. Dean," frowned Al. "It would make rather dull reading for your subscribers. I'm just an ordinary person who needed a job. Mr. Duckworth was kind enough to take me in, employ me and give me a place to sleep. The rest is pure coincidence."

"So you don't want to be written up?" Phyl was dismayed.

"Not in the slightest."

She took a deep breath and summoned up all her courage. "Very well, then. I'm going to lay my cards on the table." In a calm and serious voice, she truthfully told Al what she had found out about the alien-spotting devices and also her suspicions concerning him. When she had finished he was silent for a long time. Finally he got up and went over to the window.

"Look out there, Ms. Dean, and tell me what you see," he said by way of an answer. He pointed out the window, seeming to indicate by his gesture that he was not talking about just the alley, but the whole City and maybe beyond it. Without giving her time to

answer, he continued. "I see thousands of people, maybe more, who don't care about each other, don't understand each other, in fact don't even understand themselves. I came here, no"—he corrected himself—"I was made to come here for reasons unknown to me even now. But once I discover the truth, once I know why I am here, I will do what I must do. And the more I think about it, which I have been doing constantly ever since I arrived, the more I think it has to do with these people." He turned to face her and continued earnestly, "Ms. Dean, there is a world out there which none of you people seem to know. To put it more clearly, there are two worlds—yours," he turned and gestured out the window again, "and theirs."

He had spoken with such absolute conviction that Phyl had almost forgotten her resolve. With an effort she pulled herself together again. "Am I to take it," she asked in astonishment, "that you admit it, that you're really...not from this world?"

Al sat down on the stool again, crossed his arms, and grinned at her. "Sure," he told her. "Why not? But as the earth saying goes, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about it? The story of the century?" Somehow this wasn't what she had expected. It was all beginning to fall apart but she didn't know why. She thought for a long moment. "I could expose you, you know. You must have gone to a lot of trouble to conceal your true identity. I could make a lot of trouble for you." She suddenly found herself trapped by his gaze. "You seem to have good intentions, though." She hesitated, her voice faltering a bit. "Just tell me honestly, you're not—you're not trying to take over the world or anything, are you?"

Al laughed out loud. "Ms. Dean," he exclaimed, wiping the merriment from his eyes. "I pride myself on enjoying a good joke as much as anyone. But really, what would I—what would any intelligent being want with your world?" He continued more seriously, "Let me put it another way. I'm here on a journey of what you would call self-discovery, I suppose, but definitely not conquest. And until I find the answers to my questions, I simply won't let you expose me. All I have to do is to deny everything. After all, where's your proof?" He reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled out an ordinary leather wallet. "Let me show you something I think will

amuse you. You're a reporter, right? All right, Ms. Investigative Reporter, report on this." He handed the wallet to her. "Go ahead, examine the contents."

She opened the wallet. Inside were a five-dollar bill and two singles. In the card pockets were the usual credit cards, a Social Security card, and a California driver's license.

"Go ahead," he said again. "Read what it says on the driver's license."

She looked at it carefully. "It's in the name of Albert J. Himmelman, date of birth November 1, 1956, height six-feet two, weight 180 pounds, eyes blue, hair black." She looked at Al. "Yes, that's you, all right." She checked the credit cards. Same name. The Social Security card read simply, "Albert J. Himmelman, #299-68-4744".

Puzzled, she handed the wallet back to Al. He let it lie in the open palm of his right hand in plain sight.

"How on earth did you get all this identification, even credit cards, in only a week?" she marveled.

"Don't take your eyes off the wallet, Ms. Dean," he advised her, handing it back. "Now, open it and look again."

She looked again. Inside were three small sheets of white paper which she had mistaken for money. The credit cards and ID turned out to be various denominations of playing cards.

"How—How the hell did you do that?" She was beginning to feel very afraid.

Al shrugged. People see what they want to see. I just help them with it, said a voice in Phyl's mind.

Now completely terrified, she broke down. "You!!" she gasped. "You're the one! In the park—the Devil—the voice!" She turned away from Al and started to run out the door.

But before she could do so, he took her gently by the shoulders. "I mean you no harm," he told her gently. "But you see what I meant when I said I wouldn't let you expose me."

Moved by this final proof, not so much of his power but of his generosity, she began to calm down somewhat. She sat back down on the cot and tried to compose herself. Al regarded her steadily, but said nothing further.



"I guess," she said finally, "I guess...I owe you my life."

"Just forget it," he told her. "As long as you forget your story, too."

"But they'll find out," she protested. "Somebody will. They've got these devices. They're bound to discover the truth sooner or later."

"Maybe they will and maybe they won't," he replied. "Either way, I'm not going to be here forever. So you just let me worry about the authorities." He took her gently by the arm again and helped her to rise. "So, Ms. Dean, I think our interview is concluded, don't you? Anyway," he sighed. "I have to get back to work. I'm supposed to open the bar in a few minutes. Stay for a drink? As I told you before, it's on the house."

Phyl gulped. "No, I think not," she replied, smiling nervously. "Another time, perhaps?"

"At your convenience." He led the dazed and unprotesting Phyl out the back door. Marjorie was waiting for her in the alley.

"Have your talk with Al, did you?" Her tone was maternal. "He give you what you needed?"

"What? Oh, yes," she answered distantly. "Yes, I got what I needed, all right."

"Bless that Al," said Marjorie. "He always comes through."

Phyl walked up First Street towards Market, her mind clearing. She began to think evil thoughts about PG&E.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

**B**y the time Wanda had been searched, fingerprinted and otherwise processed into the Mission Police Station holding facility, it was late Sunday evening. Before the matron could lead her to her cell, however, she demanded and received her right to make one phone call.

Without hesitation she punched in the number of Marty's private line in his study at The Madhouse. The phone rang once, twice, three times. "Come one, come on!" Wanda muttered impatiently.

Finally she heard a click and a cheerful voice said, "Madhouse, Marty Mathews speaking."

"Marty! Thank God! You gotta help me! I'm in terrible trouble!"

"Wait! Just a minute! Slow down! Is this Wanda?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's me. Listen, Marty..."

"Where the hell are you, Wanda? What's going on?"

"I've been busted, Marty!" she blurted, starting to sob. "And it wasn't even my stuff!"

"Oh, Wanda!" he said with disappointment. "Not again!"

"I swear to you Marty, it wasn't my stuff. I wasn't even using. I'm clean!"

After a few more minutes, Marty had ascertained the necessary details. "I'm afraid you're just gonna have to sit tight until tomorrow morning. This being Sunday, and late in the evening too, there's no chance of getting you out until then. I'll call my lawyer first thing."

"OK, Marty," she answered more bravely. "But could you do me a favor?"

"Sure, kid, you just name it."

"Call Al for me, will you? Tell him what happened."

"Al?" said Marty in surprise. "You mean that new bartender down at The Last Resort? The one you and Simona've been going on about for the last week? Sure, I'll call him. He's working tonight, right? But what do you think he can do?"

"I don't know," Wanda sighed. "I'd just feel better if he knew."

Marty said the usual goodbyes, don't worries, and keep-a-stiff-upper-lips and hung up the phone. Immediately, he looked up the number of The Last Resort and punched it in.

"Last Resort, your first resort for fabulous fun," answered a smooth voice.

If Al looked like he sounded, thought Marty, he could see what had attracted the girls. He hesitated a moment and then said, "Uh, is this Al?"

"Al the bartender, at your service," came the reply.

"Listen Al, I don't know you, but I think we have a mutual friend named Wanda Bodine. You know her, don't you? Wanda from The Madhouse?"

“Oh, yes, Wanda,” he replied in the same tone. Then, more seriously, “She’s not in any trouble, I hope?”

“Well, that’s why I’m calling. This is Marty, by the way. Marty Mathews. Maybe she’s mentioned me?”

“Oh, yes, Marty,” he replied in the same bright tone as before. “You’re the person in charge of The Madhouse, right? Their leader, so to speak? I’ve not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance as of yet, but I believe I have a dinner invitation for, let’s see, a week from tomorrow, is that correct? I’m definitely looking forward to seeing you all then.”

“Me too, Al, but that can wait. Right now, I’m calling about Wanda, remember?”

“Oh, yes, Wanda,” he became serious again. “What seems to be her problem?”

“Well,” replied Marty, not sure how to go about this. “Um, she just called me. Said she’s been busted for drugs.”

“‘Busted’?” asked Al with curiosity.

“Yeah, busted!” exclaimed Marty, slightly impatient now. “You know, busted, arrested, put in jail.”

“Ah,” Al breathed in comprehension, “being held by the authorities against her will.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” Marty was beginning to doubt that Al was playing with a full deck. “She asked me to call you and let you know. Says it would make her feel better if you knew.”

“I see,” replied Al. “And where is she being held?”

“Mission Station, down on 17th and Valencia.”

“And just what is the complaint against her?”

Marty bridled somewhat at this inquisition, but decided to tell Al the truth for Wanda’s sake. “She says that she was picked up with a bag of coke the cops found in a backpack she was holding for a friend. She swears she didn’t even know the coke was there.”

“Coke?” said Al in surprise. “You mean America’s favorite soft drink? I had no idea it was illegal. One sees it everywhere.”

Marty smacked his head with his palm in exasperation. He was beginning to be sure that Al was more than a few bricks short of a load. “No, coke, cocaine!” he shouted into the phone. “You know, the white stuff you snort! What planet are you from, anyway?”

“Why, this one, of course,” answered Al a little defensively. “But I’ve been out of the country for years.” His voice again became smoothly reassuring. “At any rate, just don’t you worry, Marty. But tell me, how is it customary to proceed in cases like this?”

Marty was glad that an understanding had finally been reached. “I told her that this being Sunday night, I didn’t think we could do much until tomorrow. I’m going to call my lawyer in the morning.”

“And this lawyer of yours will be able to effect her release?”

“Sure. He’ll get her out on OR—that’s legal talk for not having to make bail after she’s been arraigned, which will probably be tomorrow morning.”

“But she will still be charged with this crime, will she not? And then, if I follow you correctly, there will be some sort of trial, and if she is found to be guilty, she will be imprisoned once again, is that not so?”

“Yeah,” said Marty grimly. “But there’s nothing else we can do about it.”

“Maybe there is.” He paused for a moment and then said in a lighter tone. “Listen, Marty, I’m glad you called. There is another matter I’d like to discuss with you. I have a sort of business appointment tomorrow, and having just arrived here in the last week or so, I don’t possess a good suit. You have a lot of people living in your house, do you not? I wonder if one of them might have a suit I could borrow for a few days. I would, of course, be happy to pay a rental fee.”

“Oh, no need for that.” Marty wondered how the conversation had changed to sartorial matters. “A suit, you say? You mean, like a regular dark business suit? Coat and pants?”

“Yes. And a conservative necktie and perhaps a matching vest would be nice.”

“I’ll check around and see what we can come up with. Uh, what size are you?”

“I’m not sure of the size,” replied Al, “but I’m six-two and weigh about one-eighty.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty big.” Marty thought for a moment. “Might be hard to fit you.” He snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute! You and Bear must be about the same size. He’s a little heavier, but he’s got

a black wool suit that might fit you. Three-piece too, if I'm not mistaken. It's been hanging in his closet for years. He only wears it for weddings, funerals, and the occasional court appearance. I'll have him take it over to the bar, tonight, if you like."

"Yes, please," said Al. "The sooner the better. I want to look my best, you know. Oh, and Marty?"

"Yes, Al?"

"Don't worry about Wanda too much. It may be just a misunderstanding. Don't call your lawyer until you hear from me, okay? I'll call you tomorrow morning."

"If you say so. But make it early. I don't want Wanda languishing in that cell a minute more than she has to."

"Early it will be. Nice talking with you, Marty." Al hung up the phone. "Mr. Duckworth," he called down to the end of the bar where BJ was sitting, reading the current month's issue of *The Gael* and drinking his after-dinner Jameson's.

BJ looked up from his paper. "What can I do for you, Al?" he inquired, a bit surprised. Usually by this time of the evening Al had everything under control.

"Mr. Duckworth, I find myself in a bit of a quandary. It seems that a friend of mine has gotten into some trouble, and I am given to believe that I may be the only one who can be of help. I may have to be gone for several hours. Would it be terribly thoughtless of me to impose upon you?"

"No, of course not," he replied, getting up and stretching. "I've only worked a few hours this weekend as it is. I'm fresh and rarin' to go."

"Fantastic! Now remember, tonight's special is the Mai-Tai." He pointed to a day-glo sign over the bar. "You do remember how to make one?"

BJ snorted. "I think it'll all come back to me all right."

"Then, Mr. Duckworth, the bar is yours." Al made a grand sweeping gesture with his right arm and removed his apron.

"Hey, anybody here named Al?" inquired a large, bearded black man in full biker's colors. He was elbowing his way through the crowd toward the bar, a feat which was made remarkably easy by the fact that everyone in the crowd seemed to be shrinking away

from him, some with notable alacrity. The large man was carrying a neatly-pressed black suit on hangers in a plastic drycleaner's bag.

He made his way to the bar, customers parting like the Red Sea before him, and laid the suit down. "You Al?" he asked the man in the red bow tie.

Al admitted that he was.

"Special delivery for you. I'm Bear." The man held out a large hand.

Al grasped it warmly. "Thank you very much for coming so quickly. What do I owe you?"

Bear shrugged his shoulders and looked around. "Quite a place you got here," he told Al. "A little fancier than I remember it, though. Tell you what. Just buy me a beer and we'll call it even."

"What's your pleasure?" asked Al.

Bear looked down the row of beer taps. "I'll take a pint of Sierra Nevada, if it's all the same to you."

"Done," said Al. "You heard the man, bartender."

"Comin' right up," said BJ, drawing the required pint. "Any friend o' Al's..."

But Al did not hear him. He was already hurrying to his room, carrying the suit with him carefully. When he emerged some thirty minutes later, his appearance had changed dramatically. He was flawlessly dressed in the aforementioned three-piece suit and had changed his red bow tie for a conservative red-and-gray striped one which he had knotted neatly in Windsor fashion. He had oiled his dark hair and combed it back from his forehead in a severe style that made him look older and more serious.

"Well?" he asked BJ as he came over to the bar and turned slowly around. "How do I look?"

"Amazing!" offered BJ. "You don't look nothin' at all like the poor, homeless feller I took in and hired not two weeks ago."

"Yeah," Bear put in. "That suit sure looks better on you than it ever did on me. Of course," he added, "I'm not really what you call a suit kind of a guy."

"Thank you, gentlemen," replied Al with a slight bow. "See you later." To BJ he said, "I should be back in two or three hours, I hope. Thank you again for letting me have the time off."

"No problem. In fact, take the whole night off if you need to. I guess I owe it to you for doing such a good job." He turned away and quickly began filling drink orders, whistling happily.

On his way out, Al walked over to the pool table which the young lawyers had adopted as their own.

"Hey, Al!" called out one of them. "What gives with the suit? Got a heavy date?"

"No," Al replied with good humor, "just a business appointment that can't wait. But say, you fellows are all lawyers, correct?"

"That's us," agreed the four young men who were standing around the pool table.

"Fine upstanding members of the legal profession," explained the blond one with wire-framed glasses, who was poised over the table with his pool cue, about to make his shot.

"You know," Al told them, "I admire you fellows. I always wanted to be a lawyer myself when I was younger. But with one thing and another, I just never got around to it. It must be very gratifying," he said directly to the blond man who had spoken. "You know, helping people in trouble, people who have been charged with crimes."

"So," he laughed, "you're the altruistic type, eh? You want to talk to Katzmeyer over there." He pointed to a short man with kinky black hair and a thin mustache who was standing at the other end of the table, lining up an eight ball shot. "He's defense, we're all corporate. I don't know," he said in a louder voice, looking directly at Katzmeyer, "why we let him hang out with us. It must be because he loses most of the time and buys the drinks." He laughed again and took another swig from his highball glass.

Katzmeyer missed his shot and came around the table. "Ryan's just jealous," he informed Al, jerking his head in his direction, "because he can't get laid."

"Oh yeah?" said Ryan, putting down his drink.

"Yeah!" Katzmeyer stood up on tiptoes and thrust his chin out at Ryan's neck.

"Gentlemen, please!" implored Al, quickly stepping between them. "Mr. Katzmeyer, may I buy you a drink and ask you a few

questions about your fascinating profession?" He pointed toward a small vacant table a few feet away.

"Sure," agreed Katzmeyer, laying his cue down on the pool table and sitting down where Al had indicated. "But make it a double scotch on the rocks. Good scotch," he emphasized.

"Let me see, how about Johnny Walker Black? Or should I go to the back and try to dig up some single malt?"

"No, no," Katzmeyer told him. "Walker Black is perfectly acceptable."

"Be back in a minute," said Al. He soon returned with a large scotch, which he set down in front of Katzmeyer, and a small beer for himself. When Katzmeyer had swallowed a portion of his scotch and pronounced himself satisfied, Al began. "Mr. Katzmeyer..."

"Oh, call me Nick. Everyone does."

"Well then, Nick. You see, I've been writing a book in my spare time, you know, a sort of police story."

"I see," said Nick, beginning to be interested. "And you need a little technical advice, right?"

"Precisely."

Nick took a larger swallow of scotch, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms. "Shoot."

"Well, in my book, a young girl is arrested for possession of a drug..."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Nick. "How young?"

"Early twenties," replied Al.

"Oh okay, so she's an adult then. It does make a difference, you know."

"Thank you for telling me. Anyway, it is late at night on a Sunday, just as it is now. I guess that's what made me think of asking tonight. I want to get her released, in my story of course, that same night with all charges removed. Can you think of a perfectly legal way to accomplish this, without resorting to trickery or violence?"

"Hmm," said Nick, concentrating. "That's a tough one." He thought for several moments. "Well," he said finally, "since you don't want the case to go before a judge, your only chance is to get the cops to admit to wrongful arrest."



“And how does one do that?”

“Well,” said Nick again, still frowning in concentration, “you got two choices. It’s got to be either a procedural mistake—you know, she didn’t get her rights read to her, or it was an illegal search and seizure, something like that.”

“And the other choice?”

“This one’s tougher. There’s got to be something wrong with the evidence. It could get misplaced by mistake, or maybe if the cops obviously planted it on her... Yeah, something like that.”

“Thank you very much.” Al shook his hand. “You’ve been a great help. Please go to the bar and tell the bartender that Al says to give you another drink, on the house. Whatever you want.” He then got up and hurried out the door.

“Hey, don’t mention it!” Nick called after him. “Wonder what that was all about,” he said to himself. He finished his drink and then, rather unsteadily, walked toward the bar.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

**A** I arrived at the Mission Police Station Sunday night at about ten o’clock. Due to the lateness of the hour and the fact that it was not yet time for the shift change, the station was nearly deserted. A bored-looking man wearing sergeant’s stripes sat at the front desk, half dozing. A few sleepy-looking patrolmen sat at desks in the back, slowly and desultorily typing up arrest reports.

Al stomped noisily up to the front desk and demanded in a loud voice, “Who’s in charge here?”

The sergeant, startled out of his doze, blinked at Al curiously and replied in a mild voice, “That would be me. I’m Sergeant Sekulovich. What can I do for you?”

“Permit me, sir, to present you with my card,” said Al in the same loud voice, as if he were sure the sergeant was deaf. With a dramatic flourish he reached into the left breast pocket of his suit, whipped out a business card, and handed it to the surprised sergeant.

The sergeant took the card and looked at it. On it was written in discreet black print, "Albert J. Himmelmann, Attorney-at-Law, Specialist in Criminal Defense." Sekulovich looked at Al, looked at the card again, and then looked back at Al.

"All right, all right, Mr. Himmelmann, there's no need to shout. I repeat: What can I do for you?"

Al leaned his face close to Sekulovich's and said in a voice only slightly softer than before, "I understand you're holding a client of mine here. I demand to see her immediately!"

The sergeant started looking through a stack of arrest reports. "Could be, could be," he said absently, scratching his head. "What's the name?"

"Bodine. Wanda Bodine."

"Hmm, rings a bell. Do you know when she was arrested?"

"I think it must have been late this afternoon. I only received the call an hour ago myself, or I would have been here much sooner."

"You would, eh?" returned Sekulovich, frowning slightly. "I didn't know you defense attorneys worked on Sundays."

"It is highly unusual, I grant you," Al replied stiffly. "But," he lowered his voice for the first time, "my client is no ordinary person."

"Really?" Sekulovich leaned closer to Al.

Al put his mouth to the man's ear and whispered, "Her family, you know. The New Orleans Bodines, surely you've heard of them?"

"Of course, of course," he replied with a blank look. He began sifting through the stack of arrest reports with renewed vigor. Finally his face brightened as he held up a single sheet of paper and read from it. "Ah, yes, here it is," he said. "We are holding her. She was brought in at about four-thirty. Arresting officers, let's see, Blake and Milton." He looked at Al as if expecting some response that was not forthcoming. "I'll have her brought to Room A, just down the hall, if you like. You can talk privately there for ten minutes or so."

"What's she charged with?" asked Al in a careless manner. "Littering, jaywalking, disorderly conduct, that sort of thing? I've been instructed to plead her guilty, pay her fine, and get her out of here as soon as possible."

Sekulovich looked at the arrest report again. "I'm afraid it's much more serious than that, Mr. Himmelmann. It seems that Officer

Milton discovered in her possession a plastic bag full of a suspicious-looking white powder. Milton tasted it and pronounced it to be high-quality cocaine. This was confirmed by Sergeant Blake. Because of the quantity found, which was nearly a pound of the stuff, she's been charged with felony possession with intent to sell. She'll be bound over for arraignment, which should take place tomorrow morning, at which time bail will be set."

"Preposterous!" Al fumed, striding up and down in front of the desk. "Illegal search and seizure! Police entrapment!" he ranted. He turned and looked Sekulovich full in the face. "I put it to you," he snarled, waving his finger under the sergeant's nose, "that your men planted those drugs on my client!" He put his hand to his forehead and looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, what a scandal! If the family hears about this—" he looked back at Sekulovich and shook his fist. "We'll sue you for false arrest, defamation of character, and several other things which I can't think of at the moment!"

Sergeant Sekulovich turned pale and shrank back from Al in alarm. He wanted nothing more than to rid himself of this crazy lawyer. "Please, Mr. Himmelmann, calm yourself," he replied in a soothing manner. "I'm sure we can get to the truth of this matter without resorting to violence or legal action. Please, follow me to Room A."

He got up and led a still-fuming Al down the hall and unlocked the door of a small windowless room. Inside were four folding chairs and a small metal folding table. All were in a scarred and battered condition.

"Please sit down," Sekulovich pointed to one of the chairs. "I'll have your client brought in immediately." Al sat.

The sergeant closed the door behind him quickly and sighed with relief. Al could hear him bellowing down the hall, "Blake! Milton! Get your asses out here!"

Al stretched his hands behind his head and propped his feet up on the table. "Poor fellow," he giggled. "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes."

Presently the door opened to reveal Wanda, accompanied by a female police officer. As Wanda entered the room the officer quickly

shut and locked the door from the outside, saying to Al, "You got ten minutes."

"Al!" gasped Wanda. "What are you doing here?" She looked at him more closely. "Wow, nice suit!" She gave a little frown. "It looks sort of familiar though."

"Never mind that," said Al, putting his finger to his lips. "I'm your lawyer, Albert J. Himmelmann. Can you remember that? And I'm supposed to prevent your rich family in New Orleans from finding out that you've been arrested."

"What? But I don't..." Wanda began, but Al put his finger on her lips.

"Quiet!" he cautioned her. "Just tell me what happened."

Wanda told him the whole story of meeting Uncle Joe, holding his backpack for him, and the subsequent discovery by the police of the cocaine.

Al listened silently to her story, then he pursed his lips. "Hmm, I think I have an idea, Wanda." He looked at her earnestly. "Trust me. I'm going to get you out of here tonight. Just do as I say and follow my lead."

She looked at him with admiration. "Sure, Al, I trust you completely. But how..."

"Never mind," he said again, as the door opened and the officer led Wanda away.

Al went back down the hall to Sekulovich's desk. There he saw the desk sergeant conferring with a large beefy black man with sergeant's stripes and a smaller patrolman who was fidgeting nervously and sweating profusely.

"Mr. Himmelmann," began Sergeant Sekulovich in a courteous voice when he saw Al approaching, "this is Sergeant Bill Blake and Officer Jack Milton, the arresting officers. Officers, this is Mr...." He looked at Al's card again. "Mr. Albert J. Himmelmann. Mr. Himmelmann is Ms. Bodine's defense attorney."

"Whose attorney?" Milton looked questioningly at Sekulovich.

"Bodine, Ms. Wanda Bodine," replied Sekulovich with some irritation. "You know," he hissed, "the little girl you busted for coke this afternoon."

“Oh yeah,” agreed Milton, beginning to remember. “The little cupcake.”

Blake rolled his eyes but said nothing.

Sekulovich leaned over and whispered in Milton’s ear through clenched teeth. “It seems the little cupcake has a high-powered attorney and a very rich and influential family in New Orleans. So show a little respect!”

“Sorry, Sarge,” Milton gulped.

“So,” Al took the initiative. “You discovered my client to be in possession of a quantity of cocaine, is that correct?”

“Sure,” agreed Blake, speaking for the first time. “It’s all in the report.” He shrugged. “Milton searched her pack, found the stuff, and I confirmed that it was high-quality cocaine. Then we read her her rights. She came with us quietly. No struggle. Everything legal.” He looked at Milton for confirmation. “Ain’t that right, Jack?”

“That’s right, Sarge.” Milton looked at Al smugly. “Everything by the book.”

Al thought for a minute and then frowned. “One thing puzzles me. You found this bag containing, excuse me, what was it again?”

“Powder,” explained Milton, trying to stay patient. “White powder.”

“We tasted it,” put in Blake. “First Jack and then me. It was coke, all right, and high quality, too. It’s all in the report,” he said again.

“So,” pursued Al. “You tasted it and discovered it was cocaine. Please humor me, what does cocaine taste like? Does it have a distinctive flavor? I wouldn’t have any idea, being an honest, law-abiding citizen.”

“Oh, it has a distinct taste, all right,” Milton informed him. “Kind of bitter, and the stronger or more pure it is, the more it numbs your tongue. Ain’t that right, Sarge?” he appealed to Blake who nodded his head in the affirmative.

“Well, gentlemen, I’m sure that efficient and hard-working police officers such as yourselves would leave nothing to chance. I suppose you subjected this alleged cocaine to official chemical analysis?”

“Well,” said Milton, turning to Blake, who turned to Sekulovich, who turned to face Al, “there’s a little problem there, see. It’s Sunday night and the lab boys don’t come in until Monday morning.” He grinned a little sheepishly.

“I see. So there is, in fact, no absolute empirical proof that my client was in possession of cocaine at all, is there?”

“Well,” said Blake, “when you put it that way...”

“Gentlemen.” Al put a hand up to halt Blake’s reply. “I think we can come to an understanding in this matter. Where is this alleged cocaine now?”

“In the property room,” answered Sekulovich promptly. “All tagged with the case number and everything, waiting to be sent to the lab and be analyzed first thing in the morning. All legal and proper,” he added.

“Then I wonder if you would humor me for just a moment.” Al looked at each of the three men in turn and said in a sincere voice, “Bring the evidence out here and all three of you taste it again. If you all agree that it’s high-quality cocaine, I will abide by your decision, leave here quietly, and return in the morning as soon as my client’s arraignment has taken place and bail has been set. By the way,” he said to Sekulovich, “I withdraw everything I said about planted evidence and false arrest.” He put one arm each around the shoulders of Milton and Blake. “These officers are obviously fine upstanding men of integrity.” Milton and Blake looked at each other uneasily as if uncertain whether or not to believe him.

“Thank you, Mr. Himmelman.” Sekulovich was obviously relieved. “Stone!” he called to a nearby patrolman who had been lounging against the wall. “Go get me the evidence tagged case number...” he looked at the arrest report again. “8759.”

“Right away, Sarge,” said Stone. He strode down the hall briskly, soon returning with a bag of white powder which bore the tag, “Case No. 8759.”

Sekulovich took the bag from Stone and displayed it prominently to Blake and Milton. “Is this the bag you found in Ms. Bodine’s possession?”

“It is,” they both stated for the record.

Sekulovich opened the bag, dipped in a finger and touched it to his tongue. A look of horror slowly spread over his face. He tasted it again. Then he put his head down on the desk and began quietly sobbing.

“What’s the matter, Sarge?” asked Milton, beginning to get nervous again. “Anything wrong?”

Sekulovich raised his head and looked at the two arresting officers. “You idiots!” he yelled. “Taste this!”

They tasted it in turns, first Milton, then Blake. Immediately after tasting it, a look of disbelief came over their faces.

“No, no, it can’t be!” exclaimed Milton, tasting the white powder again and again.

Blake just stood there impassively, like a man resigned to his fate.

“So,” said Al finally, in a cheery voice. “It’s cocaine, is it?”

Sekulovich looked at Al. He was beginning to sweat more than Milton. “There seems to have been some mistake, Mr. Himmelmann,” he said with a pleading look. “These two lamebrains,” he looked threateningly at Blake and Milton, “somehow seem to have mistaken common baking soda for high-quality cocaine!”

“Well, I suppose anyone can make a mistake.” Al looked at Blake and Milton. “You do agree that this was your mistake, am I correct?”

Blake and Milton nodded with downcast eyes, like penitent schoolboys.

“Then I am safe in assuming that you will release my client now, with all charges dismissed?”

Sekulovich avoided Al’s gaze, but nodded in the affirmative. “Stone!” he yelled again. “Go get Ms. Wanda Bodine. She’s in the holding area.”

“Right away, Sarge!” Stone ran down the hall again and soon returned with a puzzled Wanda.

“Ms. Bodine,” Al addressed Wanda formally. “These gentlemen,” he pointed to Blake and Milton, “have realized that they have made a mistake. They now know that your bag contained baking soda, not cocaine.”

"It did?" began Wanda. Al looked at her severely. "I mean, you bet it did!" she finished emphatically.

"So they have agreed to drop all charges and release you. So your family need never know. He eyed Wanda again. "So the only question that remains is, do you want to sue for false arrest?"

The four policemen, including Stone, gulped simultaneously.

"Personally, I would advise against it," said Al. "After all, there was no real harm done." He looked at Wanda again. "You weren't hurt or mistreated, were you?"

"Oh no," she replied truthfully. "Everyone was very nice. Under the circumstances, I mean. And thank you for coming so quickly, Mr....Himmelmänn." She successfully suppressed a grin.

"My pleasure, Ms. Bodine. All in a day's work." He turned back to Sekulovich. "Do you think we could have that evidence back? Ms. Bodine wants to bake some biscuits."

Sekulovich blushed and removed the evidence tag from the plastic bag. Then he handed it to Al as if it were a dead rat. "Get it out of my sight," he muttered.

Al took the bag and put it in his coat pocket. Then they went to the property window and reclaimed Wanda's possessions. In five minutes they were on the street. It was only 11:30, and it was raining heavily.

"Thanks, Al," said Wanda, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "I knew you'd come through for me somehow. But how did you do that, make them think that coke was baking soda?"

"I'll tell you later. But now let's get you home. I'm sure you could use some rest."

"We're gonna be soaked if we have to wait for the bus on Sixteenth Street," she complained.

"Don't worry," replied Al. "I'll get us a cab."

"In this rain? The streets are deserted."

"Watch this." He held up a finger as if testing the wind. Immediately a Yellow Cab came screeching around the corner and stopped directly in front of them. The driver jumped out like a man possessed and hurried around to open the rear door for them.

Wanda looked at Al with admiration. "You're really too much!"



As they got in, Al told the driver, "Page and Fillmore, my good man, and step on it!"

Back at the police station the three dumbfounded officers finally finished yelling and blaming each other.

"Who was that wiseass lawyer anyway?" asked Milton. "You bet I'm gonna check up on his ass!"

Sekulovich was searching his desk frantically. "I thought I had his card right here," he said in a puzzled voice, "but all I can find is this matchbook cover from some bar called The Last Resort!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

**O**n that same Sunday night at The Madhouse, there was a knock on the door of Violet's room. Unwillingly she closed her volume of *Secrets of the Tarot* and called out, "This better be good! Whoever's there should know that I do not wish to be disturbed at this hour!"

"Psst, Violet! It's me, Phyl," came the whispered reply from the other side of the closed door.

"Phyl!" said Violet in surprise. She got up at once, unbolted the door, and opened it a crack. When she had ascertained that her visitor was indeed Phyl, she threw open the door, quickly motioned Phyl to enter, and then bolted the door again. "Phyl!" she repeated. "Why didn't you call?"

Phyl removed her leather jacket, shook the raindrops off it, and unceremoniously dumped it in a corner before replying. "I had to see you tonight, Violet! I didn't want anyone else in the house to know, so I took the chance that I'd find you here."

"But how did you get in?" she inquired. "Marty always keeps the downstairs door locked after ten o'clock."

"I came in through the outside basement door," Phyl replied. "An investigative journalist such as myself doesn't let a little thing like a locked door stop her."

Violet put her hand over her heart. "I am so glad that you are on our side! But what do you have to tell me that couldn't wait? You

know I'm a very private person. And why all the secrecy? Is it something about that story tip of Rosa's?"

"You bet it is! I got the story, all right, and it's bigger than either of us could ever have imagined!" Her mood changed instantly from excitement to dejection as she said, "But I can't use it! I can't print it! I can't even talk about it!"

"Whyever not?"

Phyl lowered her voice and said mysteriously, "I've been sworn to secrecy! I promised I wouldn't tell anybody about it. But I never promised I wouldn't go see a friend who was psychic and casually suggest that maybe now was a good time for her to read my tarot cards while I had a particular problem on my mind."

"Say no more." Violet went over to her desk drawer and pulled out a small black Chinese silk bag. "Please hold this in both your hands," she told Phyl, "and then press it to your heart." Then she pulled out a black velvet cloth and draped it over a small low table in the corner of the room. On either side of the black cloth she placed a fearsome-looking skull candle holder, each containing a long blood-red taper. She lit these tapers with a wooden kitchen match and turned off the bedside lamp under which she had been reading. The room was suddenly bathed in flickering candlelight. She then sat cross-legged on the floor at one end of the table and motioned Phyl to sit at the other. When Phyl was ready, Violet took the silk bag from her and removed from it an ancient-looking tarot deck.

"Concentrate," she intoned, closing her eyes and beginning to shuffle the deck. When she had shuffled it three times and Phyl had cut the deck three times, Violet laid out the cards. She studied them for long moments before looking gravely at Phyl.

"So," she said in a calm, professional voice, "you found your alien. And this card here," she tapped it with her black-polished fingernail, "says that he (oh, yes, it's a he, all right) is nearby and somehow connected not only to you, but to this house as well."

Phyl silently nodded in the affirmative.

Violet continued in the same voice. "But since you can't speak of these things, I will tell you what I have concluded. If you disagree with me in any way, or if anything I say is not true, shake your head no at that specific point."

Phyl remained silent, but nodded that she understood.

“Very well.” She looked intently into Phyl’s face which was illuminated only by the flickering candle flames. “You now know that this person is an alien, but he is someone you had met previously. Obviously he looks and seems to be completely human. He is probably known by people in this house. He probably has great mental abilities with which he scared you and made you promise not to tell anyone who he is. When you confronted him with your knowledge, he probably told you that you couldn’t prove it to anyone, which you can’t.”

Phyl had not shaken her head no to any of these points, but had only returned Violet’s gaze with her own.

“However,” Violet went on, “if Rosa’s information is correct, there may be a way of proving that this man is an alien. The local cops and the FBI are supposed, by now, to have portable copies of this scientist’s invention which alerted them to the presence of the alien in the first place.”

Phyl broke her silence. “Yes, Rosa’s information is correct. That much I can say.”

Violet suddenly got to her feet, turned on the lamp and blew out the candles. Then she carefully gathered up the cards and put them away, together with the black velvet cloth. “But don’t you see,” she told Phyl in her normal voice, “if you can think of a way to tip the FBI or the police, you can lead them to this alien. They can then use the device to verify the truth of your claim. And then you can write your story. Since it’s just you, the cops, and the alien, it’ll be your exclusive scoop!”

“That’s a gree-aat idea,” remarked Phyl with irony. “Except for one thing. I can’t tell anybody about this, remember?”

“Sure you can,” Violet encouraged her. “Just pick up the phone and do it. Call the authorities, tell them you’re a reporter, and then just tell them the truth. Er, all except for Rosa’s part in it, that is. It’s not going to compromise your sense of honor to double-cross an alien, is it?”

“No,” said Phyl with determination. “You’re right, it won’t! I’ll do it! I really, really want this story, Violet!”

"I know you do." She helped Phyl to stand up and handed her her coat. "Just be strong and do what you have to do. Sometimes the Earth Mother is a hard mistress."

Phyl grinned for the first time. "Sometimes the Earth Mother is a real bastard," she retorted. Then she left Violet's room and went resolutely down the stairs.

As Al and Wanda got out of the cab in front of The Madhouse, he put his borrowed suit jacket gallantly around her shoulders for it was still raining hard. They had taken only a few steps toward the house when she saw a tall red-haired woman in a black leather jacket, collar turned up against the rain, hurrying down the front stairs. When the woman recognized Al, she shrank back from him and quickly ran across Page Street in the direction of Haight.

Wanda was puzzled. "Hey, Al, wasn't that woman the reporter we met down at the bar? I wonder what she was doing here."

Al shrugged. "Probably working on a story about your splendid commune." He walked with Wanda up the steps and started to retrieve his jacket.

"Oh, Al, don't go yet," Wanda sighed. "With all the weird stuff that's happened to me today, I thought it was going to be one of the worst days of my life. But just being with you seems to have turned it into one of the best. Come on up to my room and let me get you a drink or something." She unlocked the front door and pulled him inside, out of the rain.

He thought for a moment. "It's a tempting offer, Wanda. But unfortunately I have to go back to work. Mr. Duckworth is there all alone, and I told him I would return as soon as I could."

"But, Al," protested Wanda, "it's after midnight now. By the time you got down there, it would only be about an hour until last call. I'm sure BJ will understand. He's a nice guy for an old coot."

He was still reluctant. Finally he said, "I suppose you're right, Wanda. Just let me make a phone call. Where's your telephone?"

"You can use the pay phone in the hall on the second floor. It's just outside my room. While you're doing that, I'll go tell Marty I'm all right, so he won't call out the legal bloodhounds in the morning."

As Wanda went to Marty's study, Al went up the stairs and found the phone. Putting in a quarter, he punched the number for The Last Resort. A voice answered on the seventh ring, "Last Resort, BJ speakin'."

"Mr. Duckworth, this is Al. I'm just calling to tell you that, thanks to your generosity, my friend is all right. I have only a little more business to conclude, and I'll be there soon. I know you must be extremely busy."

"Glad to hear your friend's okay, Al," BJ replied. "But busy ain't the half of it. You know those three-fifty drink specials?"

"Yes, of course. This is Mai-Tai night if I remember correctly."

"Well, about an hour ago I ran out of quarters, so I started chargin' 'em four dollars a drink. What d'you think of that?"

"I think you're a very shrewd businessman, Mr. Duckworth."

"So anyway, Al, I'm havin' the time of my life. Take the rest of the night off, it's late anyway. See you tomorrow."

"Thank you for being so understanding, Mr. Duckworth. See you tomorrow."

He was just hanging up the phone when Wanda came up the stairs. "Wow," she said. "You should have seen Marty's face when I walked in. First he chewed me out something terrible for not being more careful. Then he threw his arms around me and told me how glad he was to see me safe. Then he got all embarrassed and told me to go to bed. But that's our Marty."

She opened a door off the hall. "Rick," she whispered. There was no answer. "Great!" She turned to Al. "Rick and I share a room, you know, but not a bed. And he's not here at the moment, goody goody!" She rubbed her hands together and beckoned Al into her room. She then took a pair of her panties from a pile of clothing in the corner, placed them on the outside knob of the door and closed it again and locked it. "Our secret signal," she told Al. "When Rick comes home and sees my panties on the doorknob, it means I've got company and don't want to be disturbed. So Rick goes upstairs to the Swamp and sleeps there for the night."

"The Swamp?"

"That's their name for it. About six burnt-out hippies have taken over the third-floor living room. Marty doesn't have the heart to kick

'em out, so he charges the six of 'em one rent, which they can just about handle. Marty likes 'em, I guess, 'cause he goes up there himself once in a while when he feels like walking on the wild side."

While she was talking, Wanda had been divesting herself of her wet clothes while Al courteously averted his eyes and pretended to be particularly interested in the scene outside the window. Finally she slipped into a fluffy white robe fastened only by a sash at the waist, and tapped Al on the shoulder. "You can look now," she told him.

He turned around and regarded her with interest.

"I hope you don't mind," she remarked with innocence, "but somehow all my other clothes and underwear seem to be either wet or dirty. I guess tomorrow's laundry day," she sighed.

"You look very becoming," he replied.

"Well, have a seat," she said, sitting down on her bed and patting the space beside her. "Would you like something to drink? I can get just about anything you want from the fridge. Each floor has its own kitchen, you know."

"A beer would be nice..."

She bounced up. "Won't be a minute." She ran down the hall and was back in seconds with two bottles of Heineken. She sat back down beside Al and they sipped in silence for a few moments.

"Boy, look at the rain come down." Wanda pointed to the window.

"Yes," he agreed. "It certainly is raining hard."

"Would you like some music?" she asked suddenly, getting up again and going over to a box of records in the corner. "I've got old jazz, mellow rock, whatever you like."

"You choose." He took a long swallow of the Heineken.

"I'll put on The Moody Blues. They're always great on a rainy night." As she put In Search of the Lost Chord on the stereo, she lit two red candles and placed them in holders on the mantle of the fireplace. She turned off the overhead light. The room was now illuminated only by the flickering candles and the streetlight coming in the window. She pulled down the shade. The room seemed closer, cozier. She opened a wooden box on the dresser and took

out a small, hand-rolled cigarette. She lit it off a candle, took a deep puff, and passed it to Al.

"Want a hit?" she asked throatily, the smoke still in her lungs.

Al took the joint gingerly and looked at it with interest. Without a word he looked at Wanda, nodded his head, put the joint in his mouth and inhaled deeply. He quickly gave it back to her, coughed several times, and leaned back against the wall.

"Do you mind," he asked her, "if I take off my clothes as well? I seem to be a bit damp."

"Not at all," replied Wanda with studied indifference. "Let me see if I can scare up a robe for you." She went into Rick's closet and returned with a red satin kimono with a golden dragon on the back. "From Rick's Zen period," she explained. "He never wears it anymore."

Then they were both sitting on the bed again, side by side, both naked under their robes. Wanda shivered a little.

"Are you cold?" Al asked her. When she nodded, he put his arm tightly around her shoulder. She closed her eyes and took another deep drag off the joint and passed it to Al. He did likewise, coughing only a little this time.

"The rain is on the roof..." the stereo said, "Ah-oom! Ah-oom! Hea-ea-ven!"

"I don't know when," murmured Al, his arm still around Wanda's shoulders, "I've been so comfortable."

"Me either." Wanda's voice was dreamy. "You remember the night we met?"

"It seems like a long time ago," he replied in the same way.

"I know. So much has happened. But that night, when Rick drove you down to The Last Resort for the first time, remember? You had your head on my shoulder and slept the whole way. I was so happy then. I never wanted to get there, didn't want the moment to end. And now, here we are."

"Yes, here we are." He had a sudden thought. "Wanda, what was that we were just smoking?"

"Oh, that?" Wanda replied in an off-hand manner. "Just plain old homegrown."

"Homegrown what?"

“Why, grass, of course.” She gave him a curious look. “You know, reefer, pot, marijuana.”

“Oh,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve never felt this way before and I wondered why. In part of my mind, everything’s hazy. But in the other part, nothing has ever been clearer.” He released Wanda’s shoulder and cupped her chin in his left hand. Then he kissed her full on the lips.

“Wow!” she exclaimed when he had released her again. “Where did that come from? Not that I’m complaining, of course.” She opened the collar of her robe, exposing the snowy expanse of her left breast.

Al regarded it solemnly for a moment. “Wanda, that is the biggest and loveliest breast I have ever seen on a woman.”

“Isn’t it though,” agreed Wanda with delight. “And I’ve got another one just like it.” She slipped her robe down to her waist, gently took Al’s face in her hands, and put it between her breasts. He emitted a muffled, but contented, sigh.

“Why don’t we take off these robes and lie down for a while,” she said, slipping completely out of hers.

“What a good idea,” commented Al, getting out of his. Soon they were lying naked in Wanda’s bed together, exploring each other’s bodies in mutual delight.

At about two in the morning Al got out of bed, dressed again in Bear’s suit, and kissed the sleeping Wanda tenderly on the forehead. “Al,” she murmured blissfully, and rolled over onto her side.

Al went downstairs noiselessly and silently opened the front door. The rain had turned to a fine mist, and the waning moon peeped through the occasional break in the clouds. “Got to get this suit cleaned and pressed tomorrow,” he thought. Then he walked down Page Street toward Market, whistling happily as he went.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

**B**y the time Al had reached The Last Resort, it was just after closing time. After leaving Wanda's bed, he had walked all the way downtown from The Madhouse, grinning to himself and whistling all the way. So light and quick was his pace that before he knew it, he was changing clothes in his room in the back and relieving an exhausted BJ of the tedious task of cleaning up the bar.

"Thanks for showing up, after all," BJ told him. "I guess I'm not as young as I used to be, and a full shift by myself when it's this busy really tires me out. Why I remember the time not twenty years ago when I could have pulled a double shift like this and still gone out drinkin' afterwards."

Al politely expressed the wish that he could have seen BJ in his prime. "Oh, by the way," he said as BJ started to leave, "don't forget that tonight is Monday. You'll want to come in a little earlier and meet our new relief bartender. I told her to be here at seven-thirty."

"Great, Al!" exclaimed BJ. "You found someone, huh? A girl, you say?" He rubbed his chin. "If she's young and pretty, it'll be good for business. But she's got to really know her stuff. With the crowds we've been gettin' lately, there ain't no room for decorative dollies."

Al assured him that the person he had hired really knew her stuff and was satisfied to work the minimum one night a week. BJ voiced his approval and confidence in Al, yawned several times, and took himself off to bed.

That evening at precisely 7:30 as Al was getting the bar ready for another night, there was a loud knock at the back door. When he opened it he saw Suzie standing there, completely transformed from the street urchin she had been just a few days earlier. The grime was gone from her face, replaced by an understated but becoming application of cosmetics. Her hair, formerly dirty, greasy and stringy, was now fluffy and blonde, several shades lighter, and tied with a red satin ribbon into a girlish ponytail. Her shopping trip with Simona had apparently been successful, for she now wore, instead of the shapeless flannel shirt and greasy jeans, a frilly white blouse with a tight black skirt that ended just above her knees. A red kerchief at

her neck, sheer black stockings, and black Reeboks completed her attire.

"Well, here I am, right on time. How do I look?" She whirled around slowly.

Al surveyed her with a professional eye. "You look wonderful, Suzie. Do come in. Mr. Duckworth should be here any minute. You remember, I told you about him. He's the owner of this bar."

As they stocked the coolers with bottled beer and cut up fruit for the various tropical drinks, Suzie made a little frown and said, "I hope this Mr. Duckworth is an okay guy. I hope he likes me. I sure wouldn't want to lose this job."

"Not to worry," Al assured her. "Mr. Duckworth will like you just fine."

A few minutes later, there was the sound of the steel security door being raised and then lowered and locked again, and BJ strolled in. "Good evening, Al," he said with good humor. Then, noticing Suzie, he remarked, "and this must be our new employee." He offered her his hand.

She took it and pumped it enthusiastically, saying, "Glad to meet you, you must be Mr. Duckworth. I'm Suzie. Suzie Utley. But you can call me Suzie."

BJ released her hand, turned to Al and whispered in his ear in a worried manner, "This is your relief bartender? Look at her, she's only about five-feet tall and can't weigh more than ninety pounds soaking wet. And she looks barely out of high school. We could get in big trouble for hiring some underage school kid."

"Relax, Mr. Duckworth," Al grinned. To Suzie he said, "Show him your ID."

She pulled a small card case out of a pocket in her skirt and presented it to BJ.

"Hmm," BJ read, "Current California State ID, name Susan M. Utley, height five-feet one, weight 95 pounds, date of birth October 26, 1967. And the picture looks okay. I apologize, miss," he said to Suzie, handing her back her ID. "But you don't look twenty-three."

Suzie flashed him a dazzling smile. "That's okay, Mr. Duckworth, I get that all the time."

“And as for her size,” added Al. “Suzie, see that keg over there against the wall, the one that says ‘Sierra Nevada’ on it?”

She nodded.

“Bring it over here and set it up.”

“Sure thing.” She walked over to the specified keg, which was about twelve feet away. It was made of cast aluminum, held ten gallons, and was almost as big as she was.

BJ made a sudden move towards her. “She’ll hurt herself, Al,” he said in alarm. “That keg must weigh near a hundred pounds. It’s hard for me to wrestle it into place, and I ain’t a small man.”

Al laid a hand on BJ’s shoulder. “Just watch,” he advised.

Suzie had already jerked the keg onto its side and was calmly rolling it toward the bar. In about thirty seconds she had set it up, attached the hose, and was busy adjusting the flow of the tap. She cleared off the foam and in another thirty seconds had drawn a perfect pint and set it in front of Al.

“Thanks,” said Al, casually taking a sip of the beer. “I don’t mind if I do.”

BJ was staring at Suzie in open-mouthed amazement. “How—how did you do that?” he stammered.

“Used to live on the street,” she told him, dusting her hands off. “You gotta be tough to survive out there.”

“Not only that,” Al said to BJ, “but she seems to have an absolutely encyclopedic knowledge of mixed drinks. Try her, Mr. Duckworth.”

BJ spat out names of drinks at her, starting with easy ones like martinis, bloody marys, tequila sunrises, then working his way up to obscure or old-fashioned ones like sidecars, salty dogs, Harvey Wallbangers, Freddy Thudpuckers, sex on the beach, Long Island iced tea. She described the components and the method of making each one quickly and accurately. Finally even BJ had run out of drink names.

“You’re hired, young lady!” BJ shook her hand again, this time with admiration. Al just watched them with a satisfied grin on his face.

Soon it was time to open the bar. “Remember,” Al said to her just before he unlocked the steel security gate. “Smile at the

customers, relax, and have a good time. This is a pretty good crowd, and usually there's no trouble. But if anyone gets obviously drunk or belligerent, don't confront him. Just let me know, and I'll take care of it."

"Sure thing, Al," Suzie replied, busily polishing pint glasses.

"And remember, tonight's special is tequila sunrise, only three-fifty."

"I got it."

As the crowd filed in, a little smaller and more subdued as it was a Monday night, Suzie took her place at one end of the bar opposite Al at the other.

"What can I get for you, sir?" she asked her first customer.

"Tequila sunrise is our special drink tonight, only three-fifty."

"Sounds good," he said. "Better give me four. I've got some friends in the back." He looked at her more closely, nodded approvingly, and handed her a twenty. "Keep the change," he told her in a casual manner.

"Yes, sir!" she replied, ringing up the drinks and putting the change into her tip jar. "I'll bring them over to your table right away!"

BJ sat at the bar sipping his Jameson's and soda and watched her, a satisfied grin suffusing his face.

After her tarot session with Violet, Phyl went back to her tiny apartment with much on her mind. She took the phone off the hook and paced the floor incessantly. She ate and drank little and slept less. For three days she paced, wrestling with first her conscience, then her dignity. She contrasted that to her ambition, and that to her instinctive fear of the unknown, namely Al.

Finally, she decided on a compromise. If she could not bring herself to contact the authorities directly, neither could she let the matter drop. Her only option, it seemed, was the anonymous phone call.

She left her apartment that Wednesday morning for the first time in days. In order to thwart any attempt on the authorities' part to trace the call, she decided to use the phone booth on the corner.

With trembling fingers, she hesitantly punched in the number of the FBI.

“What a view!” exclaimed Muldoon. He and Kelly were in his rented car high atop Twin Peaks, looking down at the city spread out beneath them. The day was sunny and clear after the storms of the past few days, and the view was, indeed, spectacular.

“I thought you’d like it up here,” agreed Kelly.

“Beats the Hollywood Hills.” Muldoon lowered his dark glasses down over his eyes and restarted the car. As they drove down the hill toward Market Street, he remarked, “You’ve sure shown me some great sights in the last few days, Kelly, but frankly I’m starting to get a little bored. Let’s see, we met last Wednesday, we got our alien ray guns on Friday,” he tried to suppress his laughter but failed miserably. Nonetheless, he affectionately patted his “alien detecting device”, which was holstered around his waist. It looked like a cross between a canister of mace and a large flashlight.

After successfully containing his laughter he continued. “And the hell of it is, that in all this time, going on five days now, we haven’t had a single lead. Paid vacations are nice, Kelly, but I feel guilty just driving aimlessly around at the Bureau’s expense doing nothing.”

“It puzzles me too, Muldoon. According to Tanner, this Auslander claims he’s still receiving positive signals from the mother device. Tanner calls him every day, just to make sure. But his device can’t pin down the exact location. Our alien could be anywhere within a 150-mile radius.”

“Yeah,” agreed Muldoon. “And unless we get something to go on, these ray guns are useless. I mean, can you imagine what would happen if a guy like me suddenly pulled out this thing and started pointing it at people in a crowd of downtown shoppers? Heart attack city, if not a full-scale panic.” He laughed again. “But these things are probably useless anyway.”

“What I can’t understand is the lack of any leads at all. You’d think we would have heard from at least some of the usual crackpots and UFO spotters by now, but not a word. In fact there seem to be fewer crank calls to the police and FBI now than before this whole thing started. I’ve been calling Chief Franklin of the SFPD as well as all the other local departments, and nobody has anything.”

"This inactivity is really beginning to bug me, though," he replied. "Hey, I've got an idea! How about this, Kelly—we go into a large movie theater. It's dark, the film has already started, we stand quietly at the back, pull out our ray guns and scan the crowd. They don't even know we're there. There's no panic, we'd be doing our jobs, and we can check hundreds of people at the same time. And if we get a positive reading..." He laughed again at the thought, "Pardon me, Kelly." He removed his shades and wiped the merriment from his eyes. "Well, then we can show ourselves and narrow it down. Case closed, and we're the heroes who saved the earth from the space invaders."

Kelly ignored his sarcasm and replied, "Let's just hope our alien goes to movies a lot."

"Yeah," Muldoon sighed. "It'd be just our luck if he's the type that stays at home and watches dirty movies on his VCR."

Just then there was a discreet beeping sound.

"I hate to interrupt your thoughts on alien psychology, Muldoon, but that's my cell phone." She removed it from her pocket and spoke into it. "Special Agent Kelly here. Yes... Of course, Director Tanner. What? Yes sir, yes, of course. We'll check it out right away." She spoke to him for several more minutes, saying finally, "Yes sir, I understand completely. You have a nice day too, sir." She terminated the call and pocketed the phone.

"Well—? Well—?" Muldoon asked eagerly. "Don't keep me in suspense, Kelly! What'd he say?"

"As you may have gathered, that was Tanner."

"No shit, Sherlock! Does he have a lead, or did he just get lonesome for your voice?"

"Actually he said he had just received a tip—from an anonymous woman—that may have a bearing on this case. You know how the Bureau feels about anonymous tips, Muldoon, but Tanner thought this was just weird enough to be worth checking out, and I agree. At least, given the lack of anything else productive to do."

"So what's the tip?"

"OK, get this—Tanner's information is that there's something strange going on at a little South of Market bar called The Last

Resort. I've been there—it's one of those seedy, dime-a-dozen, shot-and-beer downtown bars. You must have dozens of them in L.A."

"Yeah, if not hundreds."

Kelly continued more slowly. "According to this anonymous woman, a new bartender started working down there nearly two weeks ago. She gave Tanner his description—he's a big, handsome guy, apparently, dark hair, early thirties, apparently Caucasian."

"This guy sounds normal to me, so far. So what's the weird part?"

"Well, it seems that right after he started working there, the place suddenly changed."

"Changed? I don't get it."

"Like I said, I used to know this bar. When I was there last, it was rundown, shabby, unremarkable in every way. But now, ever since this new bartender started working there, it's become sort of a high-class nightclub in the trendy SoMa scene. That's the South of Market area, where all the artsy-fartsy yuppies go. Anyway, this anonymous tipster said everybody seems to think that this seedy bar is now the happening place. Young investment brokers, lawyers, real estate speculators, all spending unbelievable amounts of money just for drinks. The place has no food, no entertainment, nothing but booze, a pool table, a jukebox and a few video games."

"So you told Tanner we'd go check this guy out?"

"Sure, I told him we'd get on it right away. Tanner sounded so relieved to finally have at least some kind of lead."

Muldoon considered this. "Hmm. You say this bartender guy started there about two weeks ago? Wasn't that about the same time Dr. Strangelove..."

"Auslander!"

"Scuse me, Auslander, started getting these so-called alien signals? If we can pin this guy down about when exactly he started and where he came from...What's this guy's name, by the way?"

"Everybody calls him Al."

"Yeah, right!" smirked Muldoon. "Al the alien. Well, let's go pull this Al guy in for questioning."

"We can't yet," Kelly replied. "Tanner's information is that the bar doesn't open until eight at night, but that this guy Al is there

cleaning up and getting the place ready by about six. So that's when we'll go. There'll be nobody else in the place and we can question him alone."

"And zap him with our ray guns," giggled Muldoon.

Kelly sighed. "Don't you ever take anything seriously, Muldoon?"

"Sure," he replied. "Like right now it's almost one and I've got a serious hunger."

"OK," she obliged. "How about we head over to Tommy's Joynt for a serious corned beef sandwich?"

"You're the boss," he told her, pulling into the Safeway parking lot at Church and Market and getting out of the car. "And I'll even let you drive."

As Kelly pulled out of the lot and back onto Market Street, Muldoon sat in the back seat, contentedly zapping pedestrians with his ray gun and chuckling all the while.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Shortly before six that afternoon, a nervous Phyl set up camp in a little coffee shop across the street from The Last Resort, where she could see the results of her phone call but no one would notice her. She drank her coffee and began to wait.

Shortly after six a group of about five or six middle-aged men emerged from The Last Resort, laughing and talking cheerfully to each other. As they left the bar, the steel security gate was lowered and firmly locked behind them. Within a few seconds a car came slowly around the corner from First Street and parked in front of the coffee shop. A huge man with close-cropped hair of indeterminate color and dressed in a funereal black suit got out of the car and started across Howard Street toward The Last Resort. He was quickly followed by a short, attractive, similarly-dressed woman.

"Hey!" yelled the large man at the group of middle-aged men who were starting to walk up the street. "Hold it right there!"

They stopped and turned around, looking at the large man with mild bewilderment.



“Yeah?” said Louie. “Something we can do for you?”

“I’m Special Agent Muldoon, FBI, and this is my partner, Special Agent Kelly.” They flashed their badges. “You guys wouldn’t happen to have come from that bar over there?”

“We sure did,” replied Sammy.

“Yeah, we go there every afternoon,” put in Norman.

“Or,” added Louie, a little wistfully, “as often as Al will let us.”

“Yeah, sometimes the crowd is too big,” explained Lefty.

“And we have to wait our turn,” finished Shorty.

As Muldoon listened to this chorus of information he became more and more perplexed.

“Wait a minute,” Kelly put in. “You say you were in there just now drinking. But it’s closed.” She pointed to the locked steel security gate.

“Oh, sure,” Lefty replied. “Al always closes between six and eight.”

“To get ready for his fancy customers,” explained Shorty.

“We’re not invited then,” added Sammy.

“But we don’t mind,” spoke up Norman.

“Because we’ve all got better things to do with our lives!” they finished together.

Muldoon scratched his head. Kelly said, “Thank you, ah, gentlemen, for your information.”

“Don’t mention it,” replied Louie with a courteous bow.

“Glad to help,” added Shorty.

The group turned and walked up Howard, talking animatedly to each other.

“This gets weirder and weirder,” said Muldoon. “Whoever heard of a bar throwing out its customers at six in the afternoon?”

“And whoever heard of a bar serving different kinds of customers in shifts?” added Kelly.

While Kelly and Muldoon had been questioning Al’s alkies, they had failed to notice an old woman peering at them from the alley around the corner behind the building. Still unnoticed, she quietly went to the rear of the bar and tapped on the window. “Al, it’s me, Marjorie. Open up!” she said in a loud whisper.

"All right, all right, I'm coming!" came an annoyed voice from the bar's interior. Al opened the back door and said, "What do you want, Marjorie? I'm busy!"

She said nothing, but pushed her way inside the door, closing and locking it quickly behind her, and turned to Al with a finger on her lips. "Al," she said in a hushed tone. "There's two FBI agents nosing around out front."

"Really?" asked Al with interest. "How do you know they're FBI?"

"I heard one of 'em identify himself and his partner. They were questioning your alkies. One of 'em is a huge ugly-lookin' guy with no hair and no neck. Bigger even than you. The other one's a cute little chick. What do you suppose they want, comin' down here?"

"I don't know," he replied, "but I have a feeling we're about to find out. But tell me something, Marjorie. Would I be correct in assuming that you have no high regard for our law-enforcement officials?"

"You got that right," she spat in derision. "Meddling bastards, always bustin' poor homeless people like me, just 'cause we occasionally take some comfort in drink or drugs. Why don't they go after the real criminals, I'd like to know?"

Al held up a hand, stopping her tirade. Then he grinned. "In that case," he looked at her impishly, "want to have some fun, Margie?"

"Sure, Al," she replied. "What do I have to do?"

"Just lie down on that cot there and look as old and worn-out as you can."

"That ain't too much of a stretch," she nodded, lying down. "Now what?"

"For the most part, just go along with what I say. The rest will come to you as it happens."

Just then there was a heavy pounding on the steel security gate. "Open up in there, FBI!" said a loud voice.

In a few minutes, the partners could hear the sound of the gate being unlocked. It was raised about six inches and Al's head appeared at the bottom. "Go 'way!" he told them in a harsh uneducated voice, slightly tinged with a northern accent. "We ain't open till eight!"

"You better open up right now, or we'll bust right through your little tin door!" yelled Muldoon.

"Yah, yah, okay, hold yer horses!" Al grumbled. There was a rather nervous interval in which he very slowly began to raise the gate. Finally he unlocked the swinging wood saloon doors and let the two agents enter.

"Now then," said Al in the same tone. "Supposin' you tell me what this's all about, eh? I'm tryin' ta clean up this place so's we can open it, don't ya know." He was vigorously sweeping the floor as he talked. "And if you'd be so kind as to keep yer voices down, my old mother's tryin' ta get a little rest in the back room there. She ain't been too well, ya know," he confided in a lower voice.

"Oh," replied Muldoon more softly. "We're sorry to hear that, Mr...uh..."

"Helstrom," put in Al. "Alvin J. Helstrom, that's my name." He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thin brown wallet. "Now I know you're goin' ta want some ID, you folks always do."

Kelly looked at the ID, a Minnesota driver's license. "You're new in these parts?" she asked.

"You betcha," replied Al. "Came down from St. Cloud a couple weeks ago with my poor old mother. Doctors told her she couldn't stand another Minnesota winter in her condition. Gets real cold up there, you betcher life! We were goin' down ta Los Angeles ta visit my brother, he's some kinda fancy agent down there in Hollywood, makes plenty he does, when my old Volvo broke down. Yah, I sure was mad over that. Lucky I found this job, even though it don't pay spit. But look at me, talkin' yer ears off. My old mother says I'm a regular chatterbox an' I guess she's right. Sometimes I just don't know when ta keep my trap shut," he finished with a chuckle and began sweeping the floor more energetically than ever.

"St. Cloud!" exclaimed Muldoon in astonishment when he finally got the chance to speak. "That's where my family comes from. You know the Callahans?"

"Sure, you betcha," replied Al. "I knowed old man Callahan. Claims he useta be some kinda cop right here in San Francisco back in the 70's, I guess it was. Retired and went back home a few

years ago. Old Harold Callahan, nutty as a fruitcake now. All he wants to do is brag about the old days and show everybody his gun."

"Harold Callahan!" cried Muldoon in disbelief. "Why, he's my uncle!"

"Small world, ain't it," Al philosophized.

"Uh, Mr. Helstrom?" Kelly was determined to get the questioning back on track. "Could we see your mother? We'd like to ask you both a few questions."

"Yah, sure! But ya won't get much out of Mother." He put his finger to his head descriptively. "She kinda wanders a little these days, if ya know what I mean." He shook his head apologetically and led them to the back room.

Marjorie, who had overheard the entire conversation, let out a loud groan to conceal the grin on her lips. "Is that you, son?" she moaned. "Are we in Los Angeles yet?"

Al went over and gently took her hand. "No, Mother," he told her softly. "We're not there yet. But these nice people here want to ask you some questions."

"Yah, sure," she replied. "Yer a good boy, Al, always thinkin' of yer mother."

Muldoon could stand this no longer. "Come on, Kelly, let's get out of here! Can't you see we're disturbing these poor people. That tip was obviously based on false information!"

"Wait a minute, Muldoon, not so fast!" Kelly wore a look of concentration. "I've got a feeling that maybe these people aren't what they seem. So let's at least do what we came here to do." She pulled the alien detecting device out of her holster and pointed it at Al.

"No!" Al cried out, cowering in the corner and protecting his face with his hands. "I ain't done nothin' wrong! Fer the love o' Christ, don't shoot me!"

Kelly calmly pressed the trigger. To her astonishment, and for the first time, the red light blinked on. "Look at this, Muldoon!" she exulted. "I was right! This reading's positive!" She aimed it at Marjorie, who turned pale and shut her eyes tight. "This one too!" she exclaimed. "Both of them!"

Muldoon looked at her in amazement. "Impossible!" he said, unholstering his device. "Yours must be malfunctioning." He pointed his at Al and then at Marjorie, getting the same results as Kelly. "Well, I'll be! What do we do now?"

"I guess we have to take them to Headquarters for questioning," said Kelly.

Al was looking at them both very intently. He had gotten up and moved to within a step of Kelly and Muldoon. Suddenly he said, "Hey, what is that thing?" He reached out and snatched Kelly's device from her before she could react. "What kinda bullets does it take? And what's this little red light fer?" He pointed it at Kelly and then at Muldoon, like a kid playing cops and robbers. "Bang bang," he chanted childishly, "red light says you're both dead!"

"Red light?" Kelly finally moved toward him. He was pointing the device at Muldoon and Kelly could clearly see the red light glowing in the darkened room. She took the device from him in disgust, pointed it at Al, then at Marjorie, then at Muldoon, and finally at herself. Each time the red light glowed brightly. "You try yours, Muldoon," she said in consternation.

Muldoon did the same, pointing his device at each of them in turn. Each time the red light came on. "Damn it!" he said in frustration. "I knew these ray guns were no damn good! Come on, Kelly, let's get out of here!" He grabbed an unprotesting Kelly by the arm, then stopped and looked at Al respectfully. "I hope your mother feels better," he told him. "And if you ever get back to St. Cloud, tell my uncle hello from me."

"Yah, no problem," said Al. "Nice meetin' you folks." He accompanied them to the front door and rolled down and locked the gate behind them.

Across the street from her vantage point at the coffee shop, Phyl watched in astonishment as the two FBI agents left the bar alone, got into their car, and drove away. What could have gone wrong, she wondered. Why hadn't they taken Al into custody? They had the alien spotting devices, after all. She suspected Al of more trickery. Greatly disappointed, she got up and left the coffee shop, cursing silently.

Inside The Last Resort, Al hurried to the back room and discovered that Marjorie was sitting up and laughing out loud, tears of merriment running down her face.

When her laughter had subsided somewhat, they slapped each other's hands in triumph. Al resumed his normal voice. "And that," he said, chuckling somewhat himself, "is just about the most fun you can have with the FBI."

The following night at about 8:00 there were two familiar faces in the crowd waiting for The Last Resort to open. A tall, red-haired woman in a black leather jacket was, by chance, standing next to a short, attractive younger woman in a low-cut gold lamé dress. The tall, red-haired woman, Phyllis Dean by name, looked her up and down contemptuously. Cheap floozie, she thought, but strangely familiar. As Al rolled up the gate, the crush of people entering swept both women toward the bar, side by side, but ignoring each other.

"Ladies," said Al, addressing the two women with debonair courtesy. "What can I get you? Your large partner couldn't make it tonight, Agent Kelly?"

Phyl gave a little cry and began to move away.

"Wait a minute, Ms. Dean, if you would." Al took her arm gently. "I don't think you two have been properly introduced. Phyllis Dean, meet Special Agent Kelly of the FBI. Agent Kelly, meet Ms. Dean, your anonymous informer."

"How—how did you know?" stammered Phyl.

"I saw you watching from across the street." He looked at them both seriously. "I think it's time to end all these pretenses and charades. Ms. Dean—Phyl, if I may—if I have unwittingly caused you any stress or anxiety, I apologize. But you see why I couldn't let you print your story. And as for having me arrested," he looked pointedly at Kelly, "well, that wouldn't do either. So here's what I propose, Phyl." He took her hand and held it gently for a moment. "I have nothing but admiration for your skills as a reporter. And the way you deduced what I am from the scantiest of evidence—well, since I robbed you of a story, I'll make it up to you. Just keep coming down here to The Last Resort and very soon you'll get your scoop," he finished mysteriously, letting go of her hand.

"I guess I'll have to be satisfied with that," sighed Phyl, "especially since I owe you one for saving my life."

"And as for you, Agent Kelly," Al turned to her. "Having apparently guessed the truth about me, aren't you taking a big risk by coming here without your large partner?"

"Oh, Muldoon? I sent him over to the sports bar at Fourth and Mission, just so I could come here alone. You see, I had a feeling about you, and my feelings are usually correct. But I've purposely delayed reporting to my superior because I want to know what you intend to do."

"Well, since both of you ladies have gone to so much trouble, I think you deserve to know what I mean to do. It's true that I'm not from around here. But I don't intend to be made a public curiosity"—he looked at Phyl—"or to be hounded by agents of the law"—he looked at Kelly. "I mean no one any harm, and all I really want to do is to be able to continue the life I've recently made for myself. But we've got a tricky situation here. This whole alien-spotting device episode, started by your Dr. Auslander, has got to cease. You know I can easily make his device stop working."

"Yeah," agreed Phyl. "I suppose you can. But Auslander's a sweet old guy in his own lecherous way, and if you discredit his device, he'll become a laughingstock at the University."

"That's true," said Kelly, "but if you permit his device to keep functioning, you'll have the FBI, the police, and God knows who else running around in circles trying to find you for God knows how long. Also you'll be guilty of ruining the health and sanity of my boss, Assistant Director Tanner, who's in charge of this whole stupid operation." She gave him a pleading look.

"OK," said Al, "if you tell your boss your hand-held devices don't work, what will happen?"

"Well," Kelly replied, "it'll go something like this. Tanner will yell at Auslander. Auslander will yell at his technicians. His technicians will go crazy trying to figure out what went wrong and then go home and yell at their families or kick their dogs."

"Hmmm." While Al racked his brain for a harmless solution, the three of them looked at each other in silence. Finally Kelly leaned

over and whispered something in Al's ear. "Ah," he said. "Yes, yes, I see." His face brightened perceptibly. "Yes, sure, I could do that."

At the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, high up in the telescope tower, a huge tracking device relayed a signal back to the control panel. For the first time in weeks, a red light blinked off.

Dr. Auslander was on the phone talking to the excited technician. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I see. Do a thorough diagnostic. If it checks out OK, it can mean only one thing—that the alien has left the area. If your tests show the device to still be functional, rotate it slowly to the right and to the left. If the light comes back on, check carefully the direction in which the device is pointed."

The technician did as he was told.

A few hours later Dr. Auslander received another call. "We did what you said," reported the breathless technician, "and when we rotated the device to the right about ten degrees, we regained the positive reading." Dr. Auslander thanked the technician and hung up the phone with a smile. All his work was not in vain.

Back at The Last Resort, Al smiled at Kelly. "Well, it's done," he told her. "And thank you for a truly marvelous suggestion."

"I don't understand," said Phyl with a puzzled look. "What's going on? What did you do?"

"Let's just say," Al remarked casually, "that by tomorrow morning they'll be hunting for aliens in downtown Seattle."

"It's just as well," said Kelly. "I've never liked Seattle anyway."

The next morning Kelly and Muldoon trooped into Tanner's office to make their report. Kelly had put him off the previous day by telling him that they had been unable to locate their suspect at that time.

On the way there in Muldoon's car, Kelly had suggested that they simply report negative findings and let Tanner draw his own conclusions. Muldoon had agreed, not wanting to get involved in any discussion about the alien-detecting devices. When they arrived at the office at about ten, Assistant Director Jack Tanner was sitting at his desk, leaning comfortably back in his chair with his hands



clasped behind his head and grinning from ear to ear. As they entered he sat up straight and called out jovially, "Kelly! Muldoon! I've just received the most wonderful news!"

"Uh, what would that be, sir?" Kelly asked in a cautious manner.

"Not an hour ago, I received a call from Auslander at Lawrence Livermore. He told me he had definite proof that the alien has moved well out of our jurisdiction. I've just been on the phone to all the local law enforcement agencies, telling them to terminate Project X at once and return the alien detecting devices to me. "So," he finished, "you're officially off the case as of now. Let somebody else worry about aliens for a while. Give me your devices."

Kelly and Muldoon quickly complied. "That's wonderful news, sir!" exclaimed Kelly. "I mean I'm glad it's over, but I'm sorry we weren't able to complete our assignment."

"Not at all, Agent Kelly, not at all." He sprang up from behind his desk and walked briskly around the room, looking like Scrooge on Christmas morning. "You know what this means? I can breathe again!" He inhaled deeply and coughed several times. As if reminded of something, he strode back to his desk and took a half-empty carton of cigarettes from the center drawer. He held them aloft with a look of triumph, marched to the bathroom and closed the door. There was a flushing sound of several minutes duration.

He came nonchalantly back into the room and seated himself behind his desk again. He held out his hand to Muldoon. "Well, 'Lone Wolf', it's been an honor meeting you. I'm just sorry we had to call you up here for what turned out to be nothing."

"It's been great meeting you too, sir. And no problem. I guess I was about due for a vacation anyway. Kelly's been real great about showing me the sights."

"It's good to see you two getting along with each other," remarked Tanner with a paternal smile. "I was afraid you were going to come to blows."

"Muldoon's all right, for a big macho ape," Kelly grinned.

"And Kelly's all right herself, for a girl who dances with the fairies," shot back Muldoon.

"I thought I told you never to mention that again..." began Kelly.

"Children, children," Tanner broke in. "Take it outside. You're both dismissed."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" they said in unison and left the office. At Muldoon's car they paused for a moment.

"Next week's Thanksgiving," Muldoon remarked. "Think you can make it down to LA?"

"I'll try," replied Kelly. "I'll call you."

"Great!" He gave her a serious look. "So I guess this is goodbye for now, then?" He made no move to open the car door.

"I guess so," she said, making no move to walk away.

"Friends, then?" He held out his hand.

"Sure." She took it. "Why not?"

They looked at each other for a long moment.

"Well," said Muldoon, breaking the mood by getting into his car. "Gotta go chase the bad guys. Human ones, this time."

"Go get 'em, Lone Wolf!" She waved to him as he drove off, watching his car turn the corner and disappear from sight. Then she slowly turned and walked back to the office.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

While Al was celebrating the end of The Great Alien Hunt by resuming the relative peace and quiet of his daily routine, the scene at The Madhouse was anything but normal. The last few days of preparation for Al's dinner party created a flurry of activity. Marty made endless shopping trips buying the food and drink, Bear was given the task of purchasing the finest homegrown marijuana to be had in the entire Haight-Ashbury, while Wanda saw to the cleaning of the entire ground floor of The Madhouse.

As the day of the party drew near, however, Marty was puzzled by the fact that Al was no longer uppermost on the minds of his housemates. Wanda had for the last week gone about the house with a dreamy smile, spending an unusual amount of time in her room with the candles lit, playing a certain Moody Blues record over and over. Rick, usually sensitive to Wanda's many different moods, was now uncharacteristically oblivious to them, spending most of his

time in the basement workshop attempting to conclude his labors on the Great Sculpture Scam as soon as possible so he could move on to better things.

Simona, after her night with Tim, spent the next week in an unusually introspective mood. She had apologized to Rick, who had waited for her in front of Tim's house in the van for hours, only giving up his vigil when he saw the delivery guy from the all-night pizza place around the corner ring Tim's doorbell. He had confronted Simona the next day with a rare scowl on his face: "I may be Wanda's slave," he told her, "but a dude's got to draw the line somewhere." They had eventually reconciled, but the air of coolness that persisted between them for the better part of a week had contributed to her unusually somber mood.

However by Sunday evening, the day before the dinner was to take place, a sense of anticipation seemed once again to be building in the house. Rick had just that day finished his last sculpture and was once again cheerfully bickering with Wanda. Wanda, glad to have been brought out of her dreamy reverie, was her old imperious self with Rick. As Simona listened to the two of them argue again as of old, she found her mood brightening considerably.

And so the last preparations were made. Marty took one final food and drink inventory and then made sure that the long oak table in the formal dining room was polished and ready, and that he had the requisite number of matching chairs and place settings. Rick spent hours studying the spiritual teachings of the Tibetan "holy guys". Wanda and Simona engaged in a frenzy of wardrobe inspection, enjoying many intellectual discussions about what was or was not proper or becoming to wear at an event of this sort. Violet practiced her already flawless tarot technique and read as many palms as she could lay her hands on. Fawn wrote poems for the occasion, while Bear rolled an endless supply of joints.

By Monday evening, the group had finished their labors. The huge roast of pork was cooking in the oven. Wanda had finished baking the apple, pumpkin and pecan pies. The potatoes had been baked, the veggies steamed. The long oak table was laid with a large red-and-white checked tablecloth. The places were neatly set with polished china, crystal and silver. A huge round loaf of late-bake

sourdough bread adorned each end of the table, together with a large dish of sweet whipped butter. In the center of the table were two large vases of tiny multi-colored rosebuds. Between them was a large sterling candelabra containing six slim blood-red candles. The chosen twelve had changed into their party clothes and trooped into the large living room, where they waited expectantly for Al.

Promptly at eight o'clock the doorbell rang. Marty calmly went to the front door and opened it to find the friendly figure of Al looming in the doorway. He was wearing his bartender's outfit from The Last Resort over which he had thrown a stylish black leather jacket. He held a furled black umbrella in his right hand to ward off the rain which had begun to fall steadily again.

"Hello," said Al, carefully folding the umbrella as he stepped over the threshold, "you must be the indomitable Marty Mathews."

"That would be me," admitted Marty.

"And this must be the fabled Madhouse, home of his band of artists and other bohemian types."

"That would be us," Marty replied, holding out his hand. "You must be Al. It's good to finally meet you."

Al gravely took the proffered hand and shook it formally. "It's an honor to meet you, Marty. I took the liberty of bringing some things for the party," he said, turning to his right to reveal a huge cardboard box sitting on the porch. "It's pretty heavy. Want to give me a hand bringing it inside?"

Together they carried the enormous cardboard through the front hall and into the living room. As Marty closed the front door, Al was greeted by shouts of "Al!" He smiled and waved. Wanda rushed up to him, kissed him quickly on the cheek and then withdrew just as quickly. Al smiled and waved to her.

"I have gifts for everyone," he said, opening the box. "For you, Rick, a six-pack of Full Sail Amber. For you, Simona, a bottle of Campari. For you, Bear, three quarts of Schlitz Malt Liquor, the best that money can buy. At least, that's what Mr. Duckworth tells me." They all laughed. "Oh, and here's your suit back, Bear. I had it cleaned and pressed."

Bear took the plastic-wrapped suit and put it on the couch. "Thanks, Al, but there wasn't no rush. I got no friends gettin' married,

nobody's died lately, and," he finished proudly, "I ain't been busted for over six months now."

"A personal record," observed Marty.

Al continued to take things out of the box. "For dinner, here's six bottles of good quality wine, three red and three white. Those of you who desire rosé can mix them together. That's a little bartender's joke," he explained. They all laughed dutifully. 'And finally, for you, Marty, a bottle of Rémy Martin VSOP Cognac for afters."

"All right!" exclaimed Marty.

"And that's about it," he said, holding up the empty box. "I'm a bartender, so I bring booze." He looked at Marty. "So, what comes next?"

"Well, dinner's just about ready. Fawn and Wanda have volunteered to do the serving, so we'll let them get to it." The two girls scurried off toward the kitchen. "While they're getting everything ready, Al, how about a guided tour of the house?"

"Thank you, Marty, that would be very kind of you. And maybe, as we go, you can answer some questions for me. I'm quite interested in the history of this place, as well as the logistics of running it."

Marty puffed up with pride. He had a pigeon and he knew it. The Madhouse was his pride and joy, his favorite subject in the whole world. Unfortunately he almost never found anyone to whom it was nearly as interesting. "Well, gosh Al, if you really mean it, I'd be delighted to tell you the whole story. Twelve years ago, in the spring of seventy-eight," he began without waiting for an answer, "I had a three-bedroom flat in the Mission District on Twenty-Second Street, just west of Valencia. I had a few roommates to help me with expenses. We had some great times there. I was young and it was party, party, party every night. How I held down my job as clerk in an auto parts store, I don't know. But as I say, I was young and tender-hearted. People began showing up, saying, 'Hey man, I got nowhere to go. My old lady (or old man) threw me out!' Or, 'I got evicted. Can I crash on your floor for a few days until I find another place?' Well, I couldn't say no. They came, they crashed for a few days, they crashed for a few more days. Soon there were ten of them, then

twenty, finally thirty. It was terrible. You had to step over sleeping bodies in the morning, you couldn't get into the bathroom (there were only two), the garbage was piling up on the back sundeck. The neighbors were complaining and my paying roommates were threatening to move out. I was going crazy and I was going broke." He paused for a moment and looked at Al seriously. "But the funniest thing is that in some ways I found I liked this kind of life. I was everybody's advisor and father confessor. And there were always plenty of women, if you know that I mean."

He gave Al a knowing nudge and Al smiled appreciatively. "Anyway, after about six months of this I said to myself 'There's got to be a better way.' Then fortune smiled on me. I had never been what you could call well-off, but that very summer a relative of mine died and I was left a small bequest in her will. It didn't make me rich, but when the money was finally released to me, I knew right away what I was going to do. After looking for a few months, I found this place. The owners were quite old and wanted to move to Florida. I told them I would lease all three flats and take care of the maintenance for them as well. They were so impressed by my offer and so relieved to be shed of the responsibility that they sold me the entire building. I used all my inheritance money for the down payment and in return they structured a personal mortgage for me that we could both live with. I moved into the place that fall and immediately put the word out that we had vacancies."

"An impressive story," said Al. "But why is it called The Madhouse?"

"Oh, that! Well, in the beginning we had some problems with noise, drugs, minors, you know. The house wasn't being cleaned regularly, because I was a little too loose with the structure, and not choosy enough as to who I let move in. That winter, a runaway sixteen year-old girl was crashing with us. The girl's father, who happened to be a Presbyterian minister, found out where she was and flew in from the Midwest. So early one morning he just walked up to the house and rang the doorbell. Well the place was in pretty bad shape from the night before. The floor was littered with liquor bottles and sleeping bodies. When I opened the door, he took one look at the scene and almost had a heart attack. He finally managed

to stammer out who he was and why he was there. When we finally figured out who his daughter was, I sent someone upstairs to wake her and tell her that her father had tracked her down. Fortunately the girl, Donna I think her name was, didn't make any trouble for us. She was a good kid and left with her father. As he was dragging her down the steps by the elbow, several of us overheard him say to her in a loud voice, 'How dare you shame us by running away to such a madhouse?' So we started calling the place The Madhouse, sort of in defiance I guess, and the name stuck."

In the time it had taken Marty to relate this story to Al, they had already covered most of the ground floor. Now they had come to the kitchen, where Fawn and Wanda were busy carrying food to the dining table and opening wine bottles. "So about how many people live here now, and how do you determine who to accept and who to reject?" asked Al, clearly impressed by Marty's tale.

"As you'll see by the structure of the place," Marty replied, beginning to climb the stairs to the second floor, "there's a built-in limit as to how many people can live here comfortably. At first, these were three separated three-bedroom flats, one on top of the other, each with their own separate front and rear entrances. But about ten years ago, I remodeled the place, so that now there's only one front door, one rear entrance and one central staircase. So now it's like a three-story house." They had reached the second floor landing. "So, as to capacity, each floor has three bedrooms, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and two bathrooms. The kitchens we've left alone, so that each floor has its own cooking facilities, for breakfast and snacks. I cook dinner every night for anyone who wants it," he added. "So, on the ground floor, where I live, there's only me in one bedroom, Bear in another. The third bedroom is my study. The downstairs living room (where you came in) is the family room, and the dining room is where we'll be having dinner in a very few minutes. Up here, however, and on the third floor, we pack 'em in. Each of the other six bedrooms has at least two people (except Simona and Violet, they each live alone) and some of them have four. The dining room on each floor has also been converted into sleeping quarters for four. And the living rooms on the second and third floors are communal. There we let people crash, paying only

what they can afford by the day or week. The second floor living room is called The Dog Pound, on the third floor it's The Swamp. You take your life into your own hands going into those rooms. "So," he summed up, "all told, we have anywhere from about twenty to thirty permanent residents. Each room is charged four hundred dollars a month. How they split it up or how they get it is no concern of mine."

"Ingenious," remarked Al, "and this assures you of enough money to run the place and pay all the bills?"

"In theory," was Marty's answer, "but some people are a little, ah, shall we say, irregular, with the rent, so I find myself always one jump ahead of the creditors. I keep looking for ways to improve the system and cut down on costs. Like about seven years ago, we had some really humongous long distance bills. Pacific Bell almost cut off our phone service. Turned out one of the guys crashing here had a girlfriend in Tokyo and was calling her up and talking to her for two hours every night. So I got wise and put in pay phones, one in the hall on each floor. I'm the only one with a private phone, and I keep it locked in the desk in my study. Saves a huge amount of money."

Marty showed Al the third floor. He knocked on the door of The Swamp and then opened it gingerly. "Hey Marty dude, what's happenin'?" called out a bleary voice from within.

"One-two-three-four-five-six," Marty took a headcount of the bodies lying on the floor, wrapped in blankets and sleeping bags. "Everybody here, Stony?" he asked.

"Yeah," was the reply, "we're all crashing out. Heavy party last night, dude."

Marty grinned. "Just checking," he told Stony, who gave him the peace sign and then disappeared under a pile of blankets.

"Well, Al, shall we go down for dinner? I'd be more than happy to answer any more of your questions after dinner. But not at the table. I know I have a tendency to monopolize the conversation. And we all want to hear all about you."

Al looked at him in a curious manner. "And so you shall," he said, as they went downstairs to dinner.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

When everyone had been seated around the long oak table in the dining room, Fawn and Wanda began to serve the succulent slices of spicy roast pork, fluffy baked potatoes and mounds of stir-fried Chinese-style vegetables. After everyone had been served, the girls took their places at the table.

Marty, at the head of the table, began to slice bread for everyone. As he passed it around the table along with a crock of butter, he said to Al, "I hope you like pork. Everyone else here does, even Violet."

Al nodded his opinion that pork was quite all right with him.

"Marty's just teasing me," Violet replied. "I don't eat meat very often, but I'm not religious about it. After all," she sighed, "everything eats living things, whether animal or plant. When we die, our bodies will be food for a host of interesting little life forms."

"Please, Violet!" Marty protested, pretending to choke on his mouthful of pork. "Not at the table!"

Violet looked amused but said nothing further.

Marty stood up, tapped his wine glass with his spoon for attention, and began in an officious manner, "You all know that this dinner is being given for Al, here," he pointed to Al who was seated halfway down the table on Marty's right, "who is new in town. Some of you know him and some of you don't. Our custom, when giving a dinner for a new acquaintance, is to introduce ourselves in turn while, at the same time, telling him a little bit about ourselves. Our guest of honor then introduces himself or herself and tells us a little about himself or herself. Since I'm at the head of the table, I'll go first."

"Come on, Marty," Simona replied. She was seated to Al's right. "At this rate we'll be halfway through dessert before Al meets everybody."

"Okay, okay! So here goes. I'm Marty Mathews, leader of this house—The Madhouse—for twelve years now. My function is to pay the bills and make sure the place is always stocked with food. I do most of the cooking as well."

"You left out boring everybody to death!" Bear called out from the opposite end of the table. This was met with cheers and whistles from most of the assembled diners.

"I prefer to think of myself as a sparkling conversationalist," Marty replied with dignity and sat down.

As he did so, the person on his right stood up. She was a tall, young black woman with cornrowed hair. "Hi, Al," she said in a soft voice. "It's good to meet you. I'm Melody. I'm kinda new here. I'm just a student, no big-time artist or poet or anything. Marty kindly invited me to live here for a while when I told him I was studying urban culture and its development since World War II. He's got some fascinating stories about the way things were in the 60's and 70's. It makes me feel like I was born a quarter of a century too late."

"You were, man," said Rick from the left side of the table. "I was only eighteen when I went to Woodstock, but it was awesome. You wouldn't believe..."

"Later, Rick!" commanded Marty and Rick reluctantly shut up. "Next?"

Wanda, who was seated between Melody and Al, stood up. "You definitely know me, Al!" she grinned. "But you probably don't know what I do for the house. I'm the baker. I bake bread, cakes, pies, anything anybody wants. I'm never happier than when I'm baking something. And I make really wicked brownies when I have the right ingredients."

Al looked at Marty. "I'm confused. Do I go next or last?"

Marty laughed. "Guest of honor goes last. That way you'll be the center of attention. And those with short attention spans (that's just about everybody at the table) will be more likely to remember what you say."

"That's what I'm afraid of," replied Al. Everybody laughed.

Simona, seated to Al's right, stood up. "I guess you know me as well," she began, regarding Al with a quizzical gaze. "I wish I could say the same about you. Anyway, I'm Simona Wing, professional party girl." She wiggled provocatively. "And Marty can tell you what I do for the house, right Marty? Like I rent a whole room and always pay the rent on time?"

“Yeah,” agreed Marty seriously. “I don’t know where we’d be without Simona. Sometimes she’s kept our lights turned on and our phone connected.”

“Thank you very much, Marty!” She smiled sweetly and sat down.

The next person to stand up, on Simona’s right, was a very young looking, very tiny woman, with deep dark soulful eyes and long straight black hair. She wore a baggy gray sweatshirt over black leotards and sandals. “Hi, Al,” she began shyly. “I’m Fawn Zelinsky. They call me The Poet on the Third Floor. I guess it’s because I write poetry and live on the third floor and nobody can remember my name.” She looked around the table and twisted her napkin nervously. “I’ve never been a really happy person, I guess. My analyst says I need to get out of myself more. That’s why it’s great living here. It’s hard to be self-absorbed when there’s so much going on all the time. As to what I do here, well, I guess anything that needs to be done. I don’t mind housework, and I actually like doing dishes. Gives me time to think.”

“I’m teaching Fawn to bake,” Wanda added with pride as Fawn sat down.

Al smiled at Fawn. “Ms. Zelinsky, I would really enjoy hearing some of your poetry.”

Fawn blushed. “You would?” she asked in astonishment. “After dinner I’ll run upstairs and get some. I’ve got loads.”

“She does, too,” agreed Simona, rolling her eyes.

At the end of the table, Bear got ponderously to his feet. He was a large black man, heavily muscled, with a large black beard and a prodigious beer gut. “Well,” he said, looking at Al. “I’m Bear. I guess we’ve met once or twice.” Al nodded. “I’m just a biker. That’s what I live for, riding my bike. I got a Harley 750, the old kind, before they got those wimpy little push-button starters and all that. I’m the only one in the house can kick-start my bike.”

“It’s true,” admitted Marty. “We had a contest one time.”

“But what I do for the house,” Bear continued, “is fix things.”

“Yeah,” put in Rick. “Bear’s amazing. He does electrical wiring, plumbing, repairs walls and windows, and he’s great with bikes. Not so good at fixing vans, though.”

"I told you," replied Bear a little heatedly, "that van of yours is on its last legs. If it was a horse, I'd take it out and shoot it."

"It runs great now that Al fixed it," Rick said, sticking out his tongue at Bear. Bear sat down in disgust and folded his arms.

"Let's move on!" Marty broke in hastily.

The next two people stood up together. The first one, to Bear's immediate right, was a slender blond man with milk-white skin and short blond hair. He wore a black tuxedo, white ruffled dress shirt, red cummerbund, and had red stripes down his trousers and red lapels on his jacket. The man standing to his right was a slender black man with a smooth dark face and short-cropped black hair. He was similarly attired, except that his ruffled shirt was coal black and his tuxedo was red with black stripes.

"Hi, Al," they said together.

The light-skinned man said, "I'm George Christopher."

"And I'm Christopher George," returned his partner.

"I play the piano," said George.

"And I play sax," his partner replied.

"We play jazz," they both said together.

Al looked at Marty questioningly.

"They're the entertainment," he explained. "You'll get to hear them after dinner. They're very unusual people. They share a room on the third floor and always pay their rent on time. I think they could be famous, they're that good, but they refuse to record, and they play only at small jazz clubs for just enough to live on. And they also refuse to tour."

Christopher broke in, saying simply, "We like it here."

"We hate to travel," agreed George. Then they sat down again.

"They call themselves Jazz Image," Marty said.

"We have a new composition," George told the group.

"We'll play it after dinner," Christopher added. They both resumed eating and said nothing further.

Next Violet stood up. She was seated directly across from Al and was wearing her trademark purple lounging pajamas which she always wore on special occasions. "You don't know me, Al," she began, "but I've heard all about you. I'm Violet Miller, the spiritual guide, the earth mother of the house, if you will. I read palms, tea

leaves, throw the I Ching, whatever you want. But my specialty is reading tarot cards.” She stared at Al intently. “And before the night is over, I’m going to read yours.” She sat down without saying anything further, and Al made no reply.

Rick stood up. “Hi, Al! You know me. And you know what I do. Thanks for the sculpture scam. I just finished doing all those busts.” He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “That’s some heavy duty work, man. But I needed the bread. If I can ever help you out, you know, maybe do something for the bar...”

“I was thinking, maybe a nice bust of Mr. Duckworth,” Al said immediately. “Maybe in bronze. Think you can handle that? It would look appropriate on the shelf over the bar. Just under the clock.”

“Sure! I could do that.”

“I’d pay for it, of course,” Al told him. “We can discuss the figures later.”

Rick sat down and a tough-looking, middle-aged woman stood up, stubbing a cigarette out on her plate as she did so. She had short salt-and-pepper hair and wore a simple blue work shirt and jeans. “How’s it goin’, Al?” she said with a wave. “I’m Sam, actually Samantha, Stirnweiss. ‘Course if anybody calls me Samantha, I’ll punch ‘em in the face.” She glared at the group for a few moments. “I’m a writer. I write crime novels under the name of Dick Butts. They’re sellin’ like hotcakes. The more violence, sadism and misogyny I put in ‘em, the more I sell. I got a series detective name of Lance Boyle. Makes Mike Hammer look like a sissy. Latest one’s called The Sex Club Murders.” She grinned at Marty. “Tell Al what I do here.”

“Sam is sort of our sergeant-at-arms. Keeps the peace if any, uh, misunderstandings occur. Knows karate, kung fu, jujitsu, everything. Even Bear doesn’t want to tangle with her.”

“No need,” scowled Bear from the end of the table. “Sam and me understand each other.”

“Please to meet you, Ms. Stirnweiss,” said Al. “And I would love to read one of your books.”

“Sure, why not? Bring you one down after dinner.”

“You forgot to mention, Sam,” prompted Marty, “that you live in The Swamp.”

“Sure do!” Sam admitted proudly. “Like the company. Lots of artistic inspiration.”

“I’m sure there is,” Marty shuddered.

They had come all the way around the table to the person on Marty’s left, who stood up slowly. He appeared to be a young boy, slight of stature, with delicate features. “I’m Tony,” he said. “I don’t talk much. I just do computers.” He sat down again silently.

“Tony is an interesting case,” Marty remarked. “Nobody knows his last name or how old he is. He showed up about two years ago. All he said was, ‘I need a place to stay.’ We took him in, let him sleep in The Dog Pound. He still sleeps there, on the floor. We held our breath, just waiting for parents, social workers or cops to show up and claim him. But nobody has. He’s right, he’s a whiz with computers. That and chess, which he’s also very good at, are the only things he’ll talk about. But everybody seems to like him, so we let him stay. As to what he’s thinking, no one knows. I guess he likes it here or he’d leave as suddenly as he came.”

Tony nodded in assent.

“That brings us to you, Al,” said Marty. Everybody put down their knives and forks, took a swallow of wine, and looked at Al expectantly.

“Hi, everybody,” he waved. “I’ll try to remember all your names.” He pointed to each one in turn. “Hi, Marty—glad to meet you, Melody—hi, Wanda, Simona, Fawn, is it?—Bear—which is it, George or Christopher?”

“Both!” they exclaimed together.

Al went on. “Violet—my man, Rick—my pleasure, Sam—and, last but not least, Tony. Well, I’m Al, the new bartender at The Last Resort, mainly thanks to the kindness of Rick and Wanda here. And also Mr. Duckworth, who isn’t here, but should be. I’ve traveled around, never been to San Francisco before, but it seems like a nice place and I think I’ll stay awhile. Thank you all for showing so much hospitality to someone who is little more than a stranger to you.” He sat down.

Marty prompted him. “Why don’t you tell us some more about yourself, Al? Those of us who have met you before think you’ve

done some pretty amazing things since you've been here." He motioned to Wanda. "Refill his wine glass, would you?"

She complied and Al drank some more wine and then said in a self-deprecating tone. "Oh, you mean about the bar? Just a coincidence. Mr. Duckworth wanted to upgrade the place, so I helped him out a little. Did some word-of-mouth advertising, started serving better drinks, you know, things like that."

Violet looked at him intently. "I'm getting some very interesting vibrations from you."

Al returned her gaze. "And I from you."

"How about some dessert if everybody's finished?" asked Wanda, as she and Fawn got up to clear away the dinner plates. "I made three kinds of pie, Al, apple, pecan, and pumpkin. What's your favorite?"

Al smiled at her warmly. "I have simple tastes. How about apple?"

"You got it, honey. The rest of you can fend for yourselves." Then she and Fawn began clearing the table and carrying the dishes to the kitchen.

At the table a profound silence reigned while everyone drank their coffee and demolished their pieces of pie. After they had finished they went into the living room. A piano had been moved over to one corner and as George sat down on the bench, Christopher sat in front of the piano on a small folding chair, fondling his tenor sax and blowing a few soft tentative notes.

Marty motioned Al to sit beside him on the large sofa and handed him a glass of the cognac he had brought. Wanda sat at his feet, lit two joints and gave him one which he accepted gratefully. Everyone else arranged themselves around the living room as best they could.

"Now for the entertainment," said Marty with relish, nudging Al's shoulder. "You tell me if you've ever heard any better jazz."

Fawn lit candles all around the room and then turned out the lights. The only sound from outside was the rain tapping at the windows. The only sound from inside was the inhaling of joints or the occasional clinking of wine and brandy glasses. Wanda laid her head in Al's lap. Fawn looked at the musicians dreamily. Violet sat

on the floor with Rick. Both were in the full lotus position, facing each other but with their eyes closed.

After a short time the pianist murmured, "Fog Horns on the Bay." Then he began to play softly and slowly, almost hesitantly, first one note at a time, then simple chords, and finally working up to more complex chords with grace notes between. The sax player sat silently with his eyes closed, swaying his body in rhythm to the piano chords. After about five minutes of piano solo, the notes and chords becoming stronger and bolder, he put his instrument to his lips, eyes still closed, and blew a few tentative, mournful notes. As he did so, the piano seemed to drop away into a background for the sax without noticeably changing either rhythm or tempo. The sax grew stronger and after about fifteen minutes it began to wail mournfully like a banshee, while the piano became louder and louder, the chords making a crashing counterpoint to the wail of the sax, finally crescendoing into a flurry of harsh minor chords. As it did so the saxophone player opened his eyes for the first time and with a haunted look on his face, his sax still wailing piteously, he turned to look at his partner for the first time. They challenged each other, back and forth, for about another five minutes, and then some instinctive communication seemed to pass between them. Satisfied, they retraced their musical steps back to the beginning of the composition until the sax was once more silent, and the pianist struck soft single notes with increasingly more space between them. Then all was quiet.

No one spoke. Finally the audience began to applaud in a restrained but appreciative manner. George and Christopher smiled, bowed slightly, and then walked up the stairs followed by Melody and Tony, while Fawn went to the kitchen to get an early start on the dishes.

"Wow!" Marty said in a hushed tone. "What did you think of that, Al?"

Al had a contemplative look on his face as he answered Marty. "That was extraordinary."

They had both finished the joint Wanda had given Al and a great deal of the cognac besides.



"I doubt," Al continued, "that anything could top that. But if you'd all like," he raised his voice to include everyone still in the room. "I'll tell you my story." He looked at Violet who was looking at him expectantly. "My real story."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The members of The Madhouse remaining in the living room looked at Al expectantly. Marty looked at Simona and Wanda as if to say, "What did I tell you?" Simona and Rick came over and joined Wanda on the floor in front of Al and Marty who were sitting on the sofa. Bear and Violet hovered on their periphery.

"I'm going to tell you a story," began Al in a conversational manner as Marty refilled his glass with cognac once again. "I hope it will amuse you. While I was listening to this fine music we all just heard, I was struck by the way the two musicians seemed to communicate with each other, silently or perhaps through their music, I don't know, not knowing much about music. But however it was done, it seemed that they were communicating with each other perfectly, almost reading each other's mind. It struck me that this is a rare ability among humans."

He paused for a moment. He had succeeded in getting their rapt attention, and they were now hanging on his every word as if they were listening to the narration of a particularly gripping documentary. He continued in the same vein. "Imagine, if you will, a race of beings for whom this kind of silent communication, this mind reading, as you call it, is not only a normal occurrence, but is possessed by everyone to the most complete degree. Imagine also that these beings, through long millennia of evolution, have literally outgrown their bodies, have become creatures composed of pure energy, the same type of energy that creates the sparks of awareness, intelligence, and personality within the human brain. But as they gradually evolved to pure energy, they also voluntarily renounced as useless most of the things that are basic to the human way of life. Technology had no meaning for them, as most of technology involves methods of communication (which they did not

need) or transportation or maintenance of physical bodies (which they no longer had). Neither did they have any desire for food or drink, nor concern themselves with clothing or material possessions, for these are all things that concern, sustain, or adorn physical bodies. Even time began to have no meaning for them, except in the abstract, because time, to organic life forms, is merely an arbitrary measure of the change in physical matter, such as duration of organic life or speed of objects in motion.”

Marty tapped Al on the shoulder impatiently. “Are you giving us a physics lecture or what? And what, if anything, does any of this have to do with you?”

“Patience, Marty, I’m coming to that. But you need some background so you’ll know what I’m talking about.”

“Okay, okay,” said Marty, settling back again. “I’m sorry. Please continue, Al.”

“Anyway,” Al resumed, “after countless millennia these beings found that the only things that held any interest for them were what we would call different varieties of ideas, differences of opinion. Since they had no ‘things’ themselves, they would go to different places in the galaxy and experience different things by transforming themselves into physical beings. Then after experiencing them, they would transform themselves back to their normal selves and go back home so that they could, in effect, argue about those things that they had experienced. A good argument about why certain things existed and why they were or were not like certain other things was almost literally meat and drink to them. Oh by the way, I forgot to mention that, in addition to silent communication, these beings could affect matter by mental energy and travel at great rates of speed by the same method.”

“Wow!” said Rick, stoned, entranced and enthused at the same time. “Sounds like nirvana or heaven. You know, that state of bliss we all seek!”

“Oh, brother!” said Sam, getting up and starting for the stairs. “This New Age stuff gives me a pain. See you all later.”

When she had departed, Al looked at Rick and nodded. “Yes,” he agreed. “Something like that. So after more countless millennia, those beings who were of like mind about things gradually merged

with each other mentally, so as to better and more powerfully debate against those who held opposing views. Like different schools of philosophy on the one hand, but with the power of the greatest religious and political institutions on the other.”

Wanda looked at Al with a goofy grin and handed him another joint. “You always did have a funny way of talking,” she laughed.

Al inclined his head in concurrence and took the proffered joint. Marty lit it for him and he puffed contentedly for a moment, then passed the joint to Marty, took another sip of cognac and went on. “Now I come to the last part of the story. The part that concerns all of you as well as me. So—there are these great alliances of like-minded beings, allied because they think alike and have the same opinions about the galaxy. And the more energy beings in each alliance, the greater the power and energy of the group as a whole. Like a huge political party, you might say, or a vast religious congregation. Well, here is the point. In political parties, the worst thing one can do is to hold different political views than the group, right? Just as in a religious sect, one dare not disobey their religious commandments. So in this society of energy beings, a once-loyal member, by disagreeing with the views of the whole, becomes a renegade. When this happens, it is cast out, exiled and made to do penance by living as one of the inhabitants of wherever it finds itself. And that is what happened to me. And that’s the end of my story.” He leaned back and crossed his arms. “So now the question is, what do you intend to do about it? I told you all this because I’ve been watching you tonight and this house, and this commune of yours seems to be one of the few places where people seem to understand each other and are tolerant and accepting of each other’s differences.”

Violet had been taking all this in silently from the corner of the room. Now she came toward the sofa with a look of triumph on her face and stood over Al accusingly. “Aha!” she said. “I knew it! I knew there was something about you!” She pointed a long black-nailed finger at him. “You’re the alien they’ve been looking for! You’re the one! You scared poor Phyl out of her wits, you know!”

He regarded her mildly but with interest. "Yes, regretfully. You are correct. But I talked to her and everything is now all right between us."

Marty turned to Al as a light slowly began to dawn. "You don't mean to say," he began slowly, "that you're really an alien? From somewhere out in space?"

Al spread his hands apologetically. "That would be me."

Stunned, Marty sat back into the sofa, for once at a loss for words.

"If I have caused any of you any trouble," Al went on, "I'll try to atone. I like you all very much, both you who I've known for weeks, and you who I've just met. I would value your friendship. Which brings me back to my original point. What do we do now?"

Wanda looked at Al and shivered a little. "Wow," she said. "I slept with an alien!"

"When was this?" asked Rick with interest. "You never tell me anything anymore."

Wanda waved him off. "Oh, you know. Last weekend, I think, you know, the night after I got busted." She counted back on her fingers. "Last Sunday, I think."

"You got busted?" Rick got up and began stomping around the room in agitation. "You never told me that either. Marty!" he demanded, turning to face him. "What's going on around here, anyway?"

"Calm down, Rick," said Marty. "You were busy with your sculptures. I was going to tell you in the morning at the same time I was going to call our lawyer, but Wanda got sprung after six, seven hours and got home before midnight. So I thought, well, what's the use of upsetting you. Besides, I thought she'd probably tell you herself."

"Oh, it was great, Rick!" Wanda enthused. "Al came down to the police station in a beautiful dark suit..."

"An alien wore my suit," Bear muttered to himself.

"...A beautiful dark suit and just talked them into letting me go. By the way," she looked at Al. "Whatever happened to that coke? I hope you didn't get rid of all of it."

“Cocaine!” exploded Marty, jumping up from the sofa. He pointed an accusing finger at Wanda. “You told me it was just a misunderstanding. What were you doing with coke? You know what that does to you!”

“Yeah!” put in Rick. “I’m surprised at you, Wanda. You, like, swore an oath to me that you wouldn’t do it any more.”

“Calm down, you guys.” Wanda rose and went over and put a hand each on Marty’s and Rick’s shoulders. “I swear I didn’t do any of it. I swear it really was just a misunderstanding.” She began to giggle. “But here’s the best part. Al made the cops think it was baking soda.”

“Baking soda!” exclaimed Marty, who began to chuckle in spite of himself. “That’s a good one!”

Bear slapped palms with Rick. “Haw! The cops didn’t know coke from baking soda!”

Stoned as they were, Rick, Wanda, Bear, and Marty all fell to the floor in a helpless fit of laughter. Even Violet giggled. Only Simona was strangely quiet.

“So, you slept with Wanda,” she told him, shaking her head ruefully. “If you knew how that makes me feel... But of course you do!” she exclaimed. “You’re an alien, you can read my mind. I forgot, duh!”

Al gently took her hand. “Simona, I have nothing but the utmost respect for you and your great beauty and intellect. But you know how needy Wanda is. And besides, I seem to recall that you have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, you must mean Tim,” she replied. “Well, I guess you could call him that.”

“Anyway,” Al continued, “I would be very privileged if you would allow me to be your friend.” Gently he kissed her hand.

Her mood changed immediately. She threw her arms around Al’s neck and hugged him tightly. “Deal!” was all she said.

By this time the others had picked themselves up off the floor. “So let me get this straight,” Marty said finally, wiping his eyes. “I can still call you Al, right?”

“Certainly.”

"But you say you're an alien, huh? What do you think, Violet? In your professional capacity, I mean."

"He is what he says he is," she stated emphatically. "I will stake my reputation as a psychic on my belief that this being is not of this earth."

"Well," said Marty, "that's good enough for me. If Violet vouches for you, I believe you."

Al looked at him in astonishment. "This is all you can say? I pour out my heart to you and all you can say is 'I believe you'?"

"Well, yeah," Marty replied in a subdued tone. "I mean, this is San Francisco. We get lots of aliens passing through here. Right, Rick?"

"Huh? Oh sure! Like, some of my best friends are aliens, you know?"

Al regarded them all with chagrin. "Oh. So I have to prove myself, right? Is that it? I have to prove the truth of the story I just told you? I, who have only recently been the target of scientific research and law-enforcement zeal? All right, I'll give you proof that I am an alien!" Turning his focus inward, he began to glow ever so slightly.

Marty clapped him on the shoulder. "No need for that, old man," he grinned. "We were just putting you on."

Al stopped glowing. "Putting me on? I don't understand."

"You know," said Rick. "Making a joke. Teasing you."

"Yeah," said Bear. "You know, yanking your chain."

"Pulling your leg," added Simona.

A smile slowly spread across Al's face. "So it's true, then? You really do believe me? The only reason I told you all this is, I like it here. I've met some good people here and I'd like to stay for a while. I hope you will all be my friends."

"You know it!" replied Wanda, hugging his knees.

"I just want to know you better," said Simona.

"I guess you're okay by me," admitted Bear grudgingly. "But get your own suit."

"I still have to read your cards," remarked Violet. "Wow, where's *The National Enquirer* when you need them? I can see the headline now: 'I Read Alien's Tarot Cards.'"

“Just keep my van running,” put in Rick, “and you’ve got a friend for life.”

“I can live with it,” said Marty, lighting another joint. “As a matter of fact, why not live with us? We can kick out some of the dead weights. God knows, I’ve lived with weirder people.”

“Thank you very much for the offer,” Al replied, accepting the joint from Marty. “But I think I will remain at The Last Resort, at least for a while. Mr. Duckworth needs me.” He got up and stretched. “Well, thank you all for being so understanding and thank you for the wonderful dinner, Marty. It’s been fun. This takes a real load off my mind, as they say. But now I must go.”

“What’s your hurry, Al?” asked Marty, checking his watch. “It’s only a little after one. Stay for another drink and let Violet read your cards.”

“All right, one more,” agreed Al, sitting back down. “But Violet, if you would do me the favor of postponing your reading until I have prepared myself? I don’t want to have to leave abruptly, for there are things I wish to ask you.”

“Of course, Al,” she assured him. “We’ll make it at your convenience.”

So they cordially passed another half-hour, drinking and smoking. Al finally departed, saying with an exuberant gesture as he left, “Everyone come down to The Last Resort tomorrow night. Drinks are on the house for every resident of The Madhouse!”

Rick and Bear exchanged grins. “All right!” they exclaimed.

“Careful, Al,” cautioned Marty. “These guys’ll drink you into bankruptcy.”

“Not with the prices I charge everybody else,” rejoined Al. Then he was out the door, striding down Page Street toward Market, illuminated only by the occasional halo of a street light shimmering in the soft November rain.

They all waved and watched him go.

“What a guy!” sighed Wanda.

“Yeah, he seems OK for an alien,” Bear remarked.

By the time Al got back to The Last Resort it was nearly 2am, and the last cheerful revelers were staggering out of the bar. As the

steel security gate had not yet been lowered, he entered quietly and sat down at a table in the back.

Suzie was busily clearing glasses off tables and emptying ashtrays, whistling happily to herself as she worked. As she caught sight of Al in the back, she called out firmly, "Bar's closed for the night, sir, please come back tomorrow." Al stood up and stepped toward her into the light. "Oh, Al, it's you," she exclaimed. "I didn't recognize you back there. How did your dinner party go?"

Al grinned broadly. "Remarkably well, Suzie. In fact, I don't think I've ever had such a good time in my life."

"That's great, Al! That's just what you need. Get out and live a little!"

"So Marjorie tells me. But how did things go for you? No trouble, I hope?"

"Are you kidding? Everyone was just so nice!" She pointed at a large beer pitcher behind the bar that was overflowing with money. "Look at that! I made over three hundred in tips tonight!"

"Monday is always a slow night," he told her. "Why don't you go home now and let me finish cleaning up?"

"Thanks Al, you're sweet!" She took off her apron and kissed him, then put on her coat. "See you next Monday?"

"Of course," he replied as she went out the door. "And a great many more Mondays to come, I hope."

Quickly Al finished cleaning up and went into the back room. Then he opened the door onto the alley and called out, "Oh, Marjorie!" as if to an errant child.

A head poked out of a pile of sodden blankets about ten yards down the alley. "Who's there, what's going on!" she called out.

"Marjorie!" Al proclaimed with a magnanimous sweep of his hand. "You may gather the homeless. Six extra tonight, seein' as I'm in a good mood!"

"Comin' right up, Al!" Marjorie got to her feet and was soon kicking at similar piles of blankets up and down the alley.

As the line began to form at his door, Al sniffed the cool moist air. "Aah!" he sighed. "I love this town!"



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

It is a quiet early morning in late November in San Francisco. The rain has stopped, and the air is cold and crisp. It promises to be a crystal-clear day. At this early hour Market Street is all but deserted. A solitary figure in a black leather jacket stands patiently at a bus stop, waiting for the initial run of the outbound 5-McAllister. When it arrives, he boards it quickly and sits in a window seat looking out at the City eagerly, almost hungrily. He sits there lost in thought until the bus finally turns onto Fulton Street and begins to travel the long straight stretch of road on the north side of Golden Gate Park that leads to the Great Highway and finally the ocean. When the bus reaches 9th Avenue, he pulls the cord. The driver stops, and he gets off and crosses Fulton into the Park. By this time the sky above the trees is just beginning to turn a pale blue, while the trees and grass look blacker than ever by comparison.

About a hundred yards into the park he comes upon a small meadow. Around its edges he can see a circle of light, faintly glowing green. He knows that very soon as the sky lightens it will become invisible and completely undetectable by all who pass this way. Without hesitation he walks through the glowing green circle to the very center of the meadow. Once there he sits down cross-legged on the grass, unconcerned by its extreme wetness. He concentrates hard for a few minutes, eyes closed, brows knitted together. Gradually the green ring flows fainter and fainter and finally disappears altogether.

He then stands up and looks around approvingly. "Good!" says Al in a low voice. "That takes care of the tracking device." He looks up at the sky and says in a louder voice, "Now come and get me, Prime!" He starts walking out of the park back toward Fulton. On the way he reflects that Prime probably will come get him eventually. But with the beacon gone and the rather scant attention his people pay to the concept of time, it could be years, even centuries, before that happens. In the meantime, here on earth, life will go on as usual for Al, the humble bartender at The Last Resort.

Upon leaving the park, he waits for a few minutes on Fulton Street, then boards the same bus which is now going back downtown toward the offices, the banks, the corporations. The bus is filled with early, surly commuters on their way to another financially rewarding but spiritually unrewarding day of work. Many of them notice Al as he shoulders his way onto the crowded bus and stands in the back, steadying himself amid the lurching and jolting by hanging onto an overhead strap. With worried looks on their faces they shrink away from him because he is grinning like an idiot, occasionally whistling loudly but tunelessly.

He gets off the bus at Third Street, walks down to Howard, and turns left for The Last Resort. He wants a few hours sleep before arising at about noon. He looks around appreciatively. The sun is just beginning to rise. A perfect day, he thinks, to take a walk across the Golden Gate Bridge...

## **EPILOGUE: THE REAL LAST RESORT**

“...And that,” said Mick, tamping tobacco into his ancient briar pipe and lighting it carefully, “is the end of the story. Or as much as I’ve got so far, anyway.” He leaned back contentedly on the bar stool. “Well, what do you think? Don’t everybody talk at once.”

The occasion was the First Annual Tall-Tale Telling Contest at that well-known downtown San Francisco dive, The Last Resort. For the past seven cold and rainy nights in late February, 1991, the seven honorable judges had been listening to a number of shorter and longer tales told by several of the bar’s patrons. The judges had been chosen more or less impartially by the bar’s owner, Mr. BJ Duckworth, on the basis of the frequency and quantity of their consumption of his wares. The tales had been told for the express purpose of winning the coveted prize: A weekend trip to Reno (hotel and bus fare only) and a free draft beer every day for the next year. Emotions have run high and competition has been fierce. Mick’s tale was the longest, having taken him the last three nights to tell in its entirety.

"That was some story," BJ remarked after several moments of silence. "All right, then, any more entries? No? In that case the judges will retire and pick a winner."

The judges, by name Norman, Sammy, Shorty, Lefty, Louie, Rick, and Bear, conferred with each other briefly while BJ and Eddie behind the bar looked on impassively. Shorty, acting as the foreman for the group, stood up slowly and began to speak in a dignified voice. "Mr. Duckworth, Eddie, tale tellers, and patrons of the bar in general, and anybody else I might've left out," he took a deep breath, "there ain't no need for us to go anywhere, as we've already picked the winner. By a near-unanimous vote, the prizes of the trip to Reno and the free beer goes to our own Mick Mulrooney."

There was some scattered applause, a few muttered curses, and several cries from the back to "Fill 'em up, Eddie, for Christ's sake! We're liable to miss last call!"

Mick grinned broadly and, still puffing on his pipe, accepted his free pint of beer from Eddie the bartender, and then went over and shook BJ by the hand. When he had obtained his round-trip bus ticket and Reno hotel reservations, he turned and looked at Shorty accusingly. "What did you mean just now when you said 'near-unanimous'?"

Shorty looked apologetic. "Well, Mick, I meant the vote was six to one in your favor."

Mick spat on the floor and put his hands on his hips. "All right, which one of you bastards voted against me?"

The other six judges avoided his gaze and began to whistle nonchalantly. Rick and Bear went over to the bar and ordered another beer.

"Mick," said Eddie suddenly, "we all, or almost all, of us agree that you just told us one hell of a tale. But there's one thing I got a problem with, and that's you calling me a thief." He raised his voice and appealed to all those present: "You all know that I've been a conscientious and loyal worker here for the past three years. Mr. Duckworth can bear me out on this," he looked to BJ for support and received a nod of approval, "that I've never once even cheated a customer out of his change, let alone steal money from the bar." He

had become increasingly agitated, causing Mick to come over and put his arm around his shoulders.

"There, there, Eddie me lad," Mick tried to soothe him. "Take it easy, me boy! Haven't you ever heard of artistic license? Why, the whole tale hinges on the fact of your not bein' here and Duckworth havin' to find another bartender on short notice. Why you could say that by your absence, you're the most important character in the whole tale!"

"Really?" asked Eddie, beginning to look pleased in spite of himself. "I never looked at it that way." He shook Mick's hand. "I guess you're right. I take it all back." He raised his voice and addressed the bar's patrons again. "Just as long as everybody understands this 'artistic license' thing and that I ain't no thief." There was a general murmur of assent.

"Quite all right, me boy," Mick replied in a good-humored way. "And now, as I see it's about one-thirty, we might as well drink 'em as long as Eddie'll serve 'em. Eh, Duckworth?"

"Twenty more minutes," assented BJ, "CWI, Cry of the Wounded Innkeeper," he cried out. "You Don't Have to Go Home, But You Can't Stay Here!"

There was an instant commotion at the bar, and Eddie was hard-put to fill everybody's glasses at once.

"So, what'd you think of Mick's tale, Rick?" Bear asked him as they sat at the end of the bar sipping their final pint of the night.

"I dunno, Bear. It's really neat that he put us all in the story, but on the other hand, he sorta makes me sound like a wimp and an airhead."

"Yeah," agreed Bear. "I know what you mean. I didn't get busted that many times."

"And Wanda, man! I mean, Wanda's never had a coke habit."

"And what about Simona," Bear added, "and her weird boyfriend?"

"Yeah, Simona's real sharp when it comes to boyfriends."

"Right!" grinned Bear. "That's why she's got a new one every week."

"About the only guy he got right was Marty."

"Yeah, that was Marty, all right."

"Yeah, sure was. Hey Mick," Rick called out, "come over here a minute. We want to talk to you."

When Mick had walked over to where they were seated, they apprised him of their aforementioned grievances and then some.

"Lads, lads," cried Mick, putting an arm around each of their shoulders when they had finished. "Artistic license, remember? Besides, look how I portrayed our friends the other five honorable judges. Worthless alcoholics, all. And do you hear them complainin'? No, they understand the concept of dramatic license!" Mick finished with a dramatic flourish.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Bear finally agreed. "But everybody wants to see themselves painted in a good light, you know."

"And what happens next?" asked Rick. "You hinted that this might not be the end of the story. I think all of us want to know more about Al, the alien-but-hunky bartender."

"Well, I don't know, boys," said Mick, sipping his beer. "I just wrote this much to win the prize, you know. This ain't the sort of thing that's got any future. I mean, it ain't like it's gonna be published or nothin'."

"You never know," remarked Bear. "If the guy who wrote that sappy book about the talking seagull can get published, why couldn't you?"

Mick conceded the point. "Well, we'll see. If Duckworth should have another contest next year..."

"Oh, he will!" exclaimed Rick. "He's got to. This one was a huge success. BJ said he was making money hand over fist. And there were a bunch of literary types here every night. I guess they'd never heard of a contest like this before."

"Well, in that case... I mean, I might be persuaded... If the prizes are any good..."

He was interrupted by the deafening sound of the bar's gong, which Eddie had just struck. That being the signal that the bar was closing for the night, the some twenty or thirty remaining customers, including Bear, Rick, Mick, Sammy, Norman, Lefty, Louie, and Shorty, all filed out into the street to say their goodbyes.

After Mick accepted the congratulations of the crowd, he began to walk north up First Street toward Market, his destination the Tenderloin and the cheap flophouse hotel he presently called home.

"Al," he muttered under his breath, pulling the collar of his thin overcoat up around his throat to better ward off the icy rain. "Al, it's been so easy for you. But then, you've got the power. I know, I gave it to you. A harmless bit o' wish fulfillment, I guess, like makin' you so handsome. Me, I've been stranded on this godforsaken planet for upwards of twenty years now, and what has it gotten me?"

He crossed Market and walked west toward Eddy Street, past the homeless wretches lying huddled in sodden blankets in the doorways of vacant buildings and closed shops. "By God!" he cried, shaking his fist at the heavens, "I wish I had Al's powers. I wouldn't be so miserable then." He sighed and hunched over again as he walked into the stiff wind and the rain. "But it's too true that to have human form is to take what comes with it, for good or ill."

He turned up Eddy and walked the two remaining blocks to his current hotel, the Olympia. After pressing the buzzer and being allowed to enter by a suspicious night desk clerk, he climbed the rickety wooden stairs to his tiny, vermin-infested third-floor room, turned the key in the latch and opened the door. He switched on the bare 40-watt ceiling bulb, brushed the roaches off the bed, and sank down into it gratefully. The rusty bedsprings protested for a moment, then all was quiet, except for Mick's heavy snores and the nocturnal wailings of the heroin addicts down the hall.

Back at The Last Resort, BJ and Eddie were just about finished closing up for the night. Eddie counted up the night's take while BJ sat at the bar, drinking one last Jameson's and soda.

"Great night," exclaimed Eddie, after he'd finished his count. "That tall-tale contest was a brilliant idea, BJ."

"Yeah," BJ replied with a chuckle. "In this game you've always got to stay one step ahead. Give the people what they want but, at the same time, something they're not expecting."

"It's weird that old Mick turned out to be the winner, though. How long's he been coming in here, anyhow?"

"Oh, let's see," BJ reflected. "Must be ten, fifteen years now."

"I've been serving him his beer and whiskey for about three, I guess. Nice old guy, but who had any idea he could make up a story like that?"

"I know what you mean," BJ returned. "Sorta makes you wonder who else is out there with a great story like that. That he's never told anyone—never had the courage to tell anyone. That's one o' the main reasons I decided to have this little contest. That, and I had a feelin' it'd be good for business."

By this time Eddie had finished his cleanup for the night. He opened the safe beneath the bar, put the money from the register into it, and locked it securely again. "Well, I guess that just about does it for another night."

"I guess so," agreed BJ, downing the remains of his Jameson's.

Eddie came out from behind the bar and peered out the window. "Still coming down pretty heavy out there," he said. "My car's just up the block. Can I give you a lift home?"

"Thanks, I appreciate that. At my age, the cold and damp don't do good things for a man."

Eddie brought the car around to the front entrance and honked his horn. BJ slowly got up, turned off all the lights, and closed and locked the security gate. The Last Resort was now dark and quiet. "Sure wish I did have somebody like Al to watch the place for me at night," he muttered under his breath. "Ah, but what the hell. Who'd want to break into a rundown old place like this?"

Eddie honked the horn again. "All right, all right, don't get yer knickers in a twist!" called BJ. "I'm a-comin'!"

BJ got in the car and Eddie drove north to Market, turned right on Third, and then made a left at the foot of Geary. "You still live at the same place, right BJ?" he asked.

"Yeah," BJ replied, settling comfortably into the soft cushions of the old Chevy's front seat. "Third Avenue, just off Geary. Been there nigh onto ten years now."

As Eddie drove past Stanyan Street, he and BJ were deep in conversation. So engrossed were they in their reminiscences that neither of them noticed a strange light in the sky, unobscured by the clouds and rain, descending closer and closer to Golden Gate Park.

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